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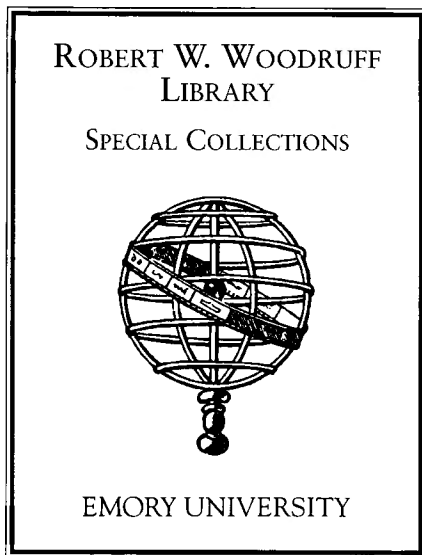
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VI.

WHO DIED LAST?

OR,

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LONDON:
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1886.

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WHO DIED LAST?

OR,

THE RIGHTFUL HEIR.



I.

LA GERMONIÈRE cannot be called a castle, for it has no towers, no moat, and no battlements. Nor is it either a Swiss cottage or a farm-house. It is simply a large country-seat or villa, built in the days of Louis Philippe by a wealthy druggist who was fond of comfort and who had no eye for architectural beauty.

Thus it happens that you would examine La Germonière in vain for any sign of artistic ornamentation—for any sculptured weather-vane, elaborate water-spout, plinth, pediment, or mouldings. The building is nothing but a cube of masonry with an Italian terrace and three rows of symmetrically spaced windows. The aspect is almost that of a barracks; but it should be mentioned that the walls and terrace are constructed entirely of granite—often costly enough as a building material, but fairly cheap in the present instance, the quarry being close by. The terrace is adorned with a simple balustrade, and two flights of steps conduct into the grounds. For there are grounds such as are seldom seen, with trees in plenty, some even a hundred years old, which the druggist did not have time to cut down and which the new owners have respected. A river flows along at the edge of the park, which is laid out in the French style, and boats ply to and fro upon the watercourse, although it is not classed among navigable streams. It is, however, deep enough—even deeper than is necessary—to drown in. In fact, the druggist who laid out the domain made this discovery to his own cost. “When a house is finished, death enters it,” says a Turkish proverb; and one night when the ex-dealer had dined too well, after settling his builder’s account with the advantage on his own side, he took it into his head to walk along the bank of the river, whence he was fished up the next day quite dead. His heirs did not trouble themselves to inquire how he had fallen into the water, and having no taste for a country life, they tried to sell the estate; but they could not find a purchaser, and La Germonière remained untenanted for thirty years.

At last, however, after the war between France and Germany in 1870, Madame Daudierne bought it for half its value from the last descendant of the retired druggist, and she now regularly spends every summer and a part of the autumn there. She is a widow; she has what is called a handsome fortune in the country—that is to say, some forty thousand

francs a year—a bare competence in Paris, however, especially when there are two daughters to be provided with husbands, and a son who has just finished serving in the army, and who has already begun to squander money. Madame Daudierne's children have, to be sure, an uncle on the father's side who may be expected to leave them his money, for he has never married and possesses a large fortune, made in California, where he went to try his luck after leading a gay life in his youth.

But this uncle is an eccentric man who has annoying views as to matters of inheritance. He maintains that a man has a right to dispose of his money as he sees fit—to leave it as he likes, or even to spend it during his lifetime if he chooses to do so. He is kind as a relation, indulgent to his nephew, very affectionate towards his nieces, and most devoted to his sister-in-law, although he often ridicules her ideas as to her daughters' education and the dangers to which young men are exposed in Paris.

Uncle Armand is, however, a pleasant companion, bearing his fifty years of age lightly enough; and he is highly appreciated at the "Gnats," a Parisian club where he has passed fully a third of his life. He is somewhat dreaded there, for he has a biting tongue, and does not spare the people to whom he takes a dislike. But he is forgiven for being sarcastic, as he is very witty as well. When his sister-in-law is in the country he does not often visit her. He excuses himself by saying that La Germonière lacks female society, and as at his age such an excuse is absurd, he declares that he means no more than that he likes to converse with ladies. Men, he declares, have not the taste to appreciate little spiteful witticisms such as he delights in.

This last summer, however, instead of going to Biarritz, where he has been in the habit of joining other bachelors like himself, and ladies capable of keeping up an entertaining conversation, he repaired to La Germonière at the opening of the shooting season, to the great astonishment and delight of his sister-in-law, whom he informed that he had come to make a long stay. It is now November; he is still there, and says nothing about going away. He had not handled a gun for ten years, but he has suddenly begun to be very fond of shooting. He shot partridges in September, pheasants in October, and after All-saints'-day he set to work with the snipe. There is nothing to show that he will not even attack the wild duck in the neighbouring marshes.

Everything has changed in the house since his arrival. He has induced agreeable Parisians to visit there, driven off stupid country people, and turned others to account. The little town of Arcy-sur-Beuvron is but seven miles from La Germonière. It certainly used to be the sleepiest prefecture in the whole department of Orne-et-Sarthe, but uncle Armand has made it a branch of Trouville and Aix-en-Savoie. Baccarat is now played in the Literary Rooms, where for ages back boston had been the only game, and equipages with four horses drive thence with visitors for Madame Daudierne. There is a talk of having private theatricals this winter at the château, for La Germonière is now spoken of as "the château," and with this the lady owner finds no fault.

The people who have lived longest in the district shake their heads and declare Madame Daudierne is living at a ruinous rate, but mothers of families make no objection, for they hope to profit by all this stir to find matches for their daughters, and Madame Daudierne having two herself probably agrees with them as to the wisdom of the new course, for she

allows her agreeable brother-in law to do as he pleases, and he makes up parties of some sort almost every day. By dint of promoting all kinds of entertainments, he has, however, succeeded in tiring himself to a certain extent, and sometimes looks rather weary, especially after a hearty dinner. He seems to be thinking of something else besides his digestion. What can it be? That is what no one knows, as no one dares to question him.

His sister-in-law wonders whether he has lost a large amount at play, and one of his nieces suspects him of having fallen in love. This is the younger one, whose name is Germaine, and who always says whatever comes into her head; she even declares that she will make her uncle tell her the name of his beloved. But Laurence, the elder and more serious of the girls, inclines to the belief that uncle Armand is too sensible to make himself ridiculous by indulging in the tender passion at his age. Their brother Alfred, however, throws out mysterious allusions to some fair lady who has recently gone to Russia, and he declares that his uncle is mourning over her unexpected freak.

Be this as it may, the old bachelor has suddenly become silent and gloomy. He only rouses himself from his abnormal torpor to indulge in some biting sarcasm, and this evening especially—a dull autumnal evening—he seems to be quite cross. He is lost in the depths of a huge arm-chair stationed at a corner of the great fireplace in the drawing-room, and Madame Daudierne sits facing him.

There has only been the family at dinner, but some company is expected. In fact, company is always expected. The fashionable young men from Arcy-sur-Beuvron do not need to be invited to put in an appearance at nine o'clock and take tea, and then a dance follows with music. Laurence and Germaine have gone to their rooms to dress. Alfred is away in Paris on pretence of making arrangements to begin the study of law, and at the present moment he must be displaying his shirt front in the stage-box of a small theatre, where he goes so often that everybody knows him by sight.

The brother and the sister-in-law have been sitting alone together for twenty minutes or more, and have not yet exchanged a word. Nothing is heard but the distant rustling of the park trees stirred by the wind, which is blowing almost tempestuously. It does not rain, but the leaves are falling everywhere, and the air is sharp and cold. The drawing-room is snug, warm, and well lighted. Winter reigns outside, and it is pleasant to be able to deride the frosty night with one's feet on the andirons.

"What a gale!" grumbles uncle Armand, after rubbing his eyes like a man roused from dreamy slumber.

"Frightful!" replies Madame Daudierne. "I don't think that we shall have any visitors to-night."

"The fact is, my dear Reine, that if the natives of Arcy-sur-Beuvron run the risk of coming here for the sake of flirting with your girls, they must be insane. '*Crime alone would venture out on such a night,*' wrote the departed Ducray-Dumenil."

"Who was Ducray-Dumenil?" asks the lady of the castle, with an absent air.

"A writer of romance who was much read under the First Empire, and who had a decided style of his own, as you can see by this specimen of his prose. I don't believe that the dandies of Arcy will profit by the hurricane to commit any crimes, but I doubt whether they will brave it for the sake of your daughters."

"My daughters will get along very well without them, and so will you, I imagine," replies Madame Daudierne.

"Oh, there are two or three of them who are very entertaining, and I'll venture to say that Laurence and Germaine will regret not seeing them—Germaine especially. She adores music, and is wild about dancing. It is time for her to get married."

"But she must wait till her elder sister has been to church. You speak of it, my dear Armand, as though it were the easiest matter in the world; but it is far from being so."

"I shouldn't think it hard," is uncle Armand's remark, "especially as regards Germaine, for she charms everybody at first sight. Laurence is very pleasing to all who see her at home, but so many people only care for gaiety of manner."

"Laurence has sterling good qualities," replies Madame Daudierne, somewhat vexed, "and I don't see why she shouldn't make a suitable match."

"She will find ten husbands if she wishes; but she mustn't be too fastidious."

"It seems to me that she has every right to be so."

Instead of replying, uncle Armand began to whistle softly.

"Really, Armand," said Madame Daudierne, now truly offended, "I don't know what there is amiss with you, but you seem bent upon vexing me about my girls."

"What! I?" retorted the old bachelor. "I love your girls and all your children as well as though they were my own, without even excepting that little fop of an Alfred, who is already thinking of what you will leave him and what I may leave him, too. But I haven't the fond fancies of a mother, and I look upon the situation as it really is. What dowry can you give each of your daughters?"

"Why, a hundred thousand francs apiece, you know that very well; and you also know that I cannot give them any more."

"Good! and after your death they will have as much more if my nephew doesn't cut down their share by running up debts which you would be weak enough to pay. But just now they have nothing at all, as their father did not leave them anything when he died. He had no fortune when you saw fit to marry him under the system which settles the wife's property on herself. He hadn't a penny more than I had myself before I made some money in San Francisco. Well, your girls merely have two hundred thousand francs apiece, 'including their expectations,' as the prospectus of a matrimonial agency would say. It is clear that they must marry millionaires."

"That is just the way you always talk! You carry everything to extremes. I think, of course, that it would suit Germaine very well if she had a rich husband."

"Do you think that Laurence could get along with a poor one?" asked uncle Armand.

"I do, indeed," replied Madame Daudierne, "if she loved him. She has simple tastes, a thoughtful mind, and an even temper at all times. She is neither capricious nor ambitious, nor——"

"Nor giddy, nor of too ardent a nature," broke in M. Daudierne. "I grant that, although I have, before now, seen volcanoes covered with snow."

"How can you compare my poor Laurence to a volcano? That is too

bad, and I declare, Armand, that I think you are trying to provoke me."

"Not the faintest thought of such a thing, I assure you, and as you object to the word volcano, I will withdraw it. I know what are the good qualities of your elder daughter, and I sincerely hope that she will find a husband worthy of her. But up to the present time I have seen no one here who is fit for her; not that there is a lack of suitors. Since I took up my quarters at La Germonière all the young men of Arcy have appeared before me, and I have gazed at half a dozen fellows who aspire to become your sons-in-law, but not one of them fulfils my expectations. There is the great beau of the place, the handsome Arthur du Pomméval, who is not at all a fool, and, in fact, it seems to me that your girls like him very well; but a gentleman who spends his money on country races and has but fifteen thousand francs a year does not appear to me to be very desirable as a husband."

"He has an uncle whose heir he is," said Madame Daudierne, in a low tone, as if half afraid of her remark.

"That is a thing which no one ought to count upon: inheriting from an uncle," said her brother-in-law. "Let us talk of something else, my dear Reine; whom do you expect this evening?"

"Everybody and nobody. Any one may drop in between nine and midnight, but the weather is so bad! so perhaps no one will come, excepting our good doctor."

"So much the better," remarked uncle Armand. "His philosophical views are the same as mine."

"Perhaps our neighbours from the opposite side of the river will pay us the visit which their nephew, Monsieur du Pomméval, has talked of for these three months past."

"Oh, yes! the Vignemals. But unless they are crazy they will stay at home, for the wind seems to be turning into a perfect cyclone. But what was that?"

"What do you mean?"

"That cry from the end of the garden. It sounded like a call for help."

"You must be mistaken, Armand," replied Madame Daudierne, quietly. "There can't be any one walking in the park at this hour and in such abominable weather."

"I assure you, my dear sister, that I heard a cry, a cry of distress," rejoined uncle Armand, who had gone to the glass door opening on to the garden, and was listening with his ears to the window panes.

"What you heard was the wind," urged Madame Daudierne, shrugging her shoulders.

"No it wasn't. I know the sound of the wind. The voice was that of some man or woman."

"Do you imagine that any one has been in my park? You will positively frighten me with all your horrid fancies."

"I don't say that," was the reply, "but some accident may have happened. The river is but a few yards off, that pretty stream where the former owner of this house was drowned. Who knows but that one of your servants may have fallen into the water?"

"My servants don't ramble about at night time in dangerous places."

"Oh, for that matter, some sentimental servant-girl may have gone to meet her sweetheart in a lonely spot, by moonlight. The moon is up now. But I don't hear anything more."

"That is because there has not been any accident whatever."
 "It may be that the person who called for help is dead," retorted the old bachelor, unwilling to give up his point.
 Armand, you are perfectly intolerable to-night! You know that I am very nervous, and yet you take pleasure in frightening me."

The conversation was now interrupted by a burst of silvery laughter. The door of the room was noisily opened and two young girls entered, hand in hand. They did not resemble each other in the least. One was a rosy blonde, with beautiful light brown hair and black eyes, sparkling with mischievous mirth. The other was a pale brunette, with large eyes of an indescribable colour. Uncle Armand asserted that they were purple, but this vexed Madame Daudierne. It is certain that they were superb, though less brilliant than those of her blonde sister. They had a touching expression of resignation, and at times a flash, which appeared and disappeared at once, shot from them. That evening, however, they did not express anything but indifference, and the fair Germaine's bursts of laughter did not rouse her brunette sister from her calmness.

"You seem to be very merry, little girl," said uncle Armand.

"I have to make fun for two," replied Germaine. "Laurence absolutely refuses to smile. I have just been telling her the funniest stories imaginable. I have been taking off old Baroness Verton when she gets angry with her partner at whist. But all in vain. Mademoiselle has made up her mind to be melancholy, just as the barometer has made up its mind to be 'bad weather' ever since yesterday morning. I should really like to know why she is out of spirits. She makes an immense impression wherever she goes. This very week Monsieur du Pomméval, who sets the fashion for all the gilded youth of Arcy, has waltzed with her no fewer than seven times, while he has only honoured me with three little mazurkas."

"Four—I counted them," said Laurence, softly, "and, besides, you know very well that if Monsieur du Pomméval dances with me it is only because he usually comes late and finds you engaged for the whole night."

"Oh, I forgive him! But I wish he would bring some of his friends this evening, for I have been doing crochet-work for two whole days now, and I feel the want of exercise."

"Come, let us have a little soft music," said her uncle, "for we shall not have any visitors to-night. There is wind enough to blow all the dandies in the neighbourhood into fragments."

"So there is," exclaimed Germaine, running to the window, "and it is snowing besides. So much the better! I so like snow. It makes the trees look as though they were all in white muslin and going to a 'white ball,' and they seem to be bowing to one another, just as people used to do when it was the fashion to dance the 'Lancers.' Besides, if the water freezes at the end of the garden, we shall be able to skate. That is the best fun in the world. But the young gentlemen of Arcy are afraid of the cold. If I had a lover I should insist upon being serenaded under my window with the thermometer at thirty below zero."

"Germaine! how you do run on!" remonstrated Madame Daudierne. "Your sister is embroidering already. Help her to finish that quilt. It will never be done."

"No, indeed, I am tired of embroidering. I would rather play a little. I will give you one of Offenbach's quadrilles, and I shall perhaps manage to fancy that I am dancing."

"Don't play too loud," grumbled uncle Armand. "I like music in the distance."

"Don't be alarmed, uncle; I will use the soft pedal," replied Germaine, seating herself on the piano stool.

Laurence was already at work and did not look up; while Monsieur Daudierne, who had quite forgotten the cries he had heard from outside, was standing in front of the fire, when a servant in brown livery suddenly announced, in a low tone: "Dr. Subligny."

"I am glad to see you!" said uncle Armand to the visitor. "You at all events don't desert us under pretence that the roads are bad."

"To brave the tempest for the sake of seeing us is beautiful, touching, sublime!" cried Germaine, clapping her hands.

"Good evening, dear sir," said Madame Daudierne. "Come near the fire; you must be almost frozen."

"How did you come?" asked uncle Armand.

Everybody was speaking at once excepting Laurence, who contented herself with giving the new comer a friendly smile. The physician so cordially welcomed was a man over sixty years of age, but as straight as a poplar and as stout as an oak. He had been an army surgeon in his younger days, and had a certain abruptness of manner which was softened, however, by contact with society. He was a well-bred and worthy man, and his features expressed frankness and goodness, with just a touch of irony. He was much liked in the town, and petted at La Germonière, where he came whenever he pleased, and he delighted in passing his evenings there, especially when Monsieur Armand Daudierne was on a visit. Dr. Subligny had never been married, and the two old bachelors agreed very well together.

"I came on foot, madame," he said, after making his bow to Madame Daudierne and her daughters. "My mare is old, and I was afraid that she might break a leg in this frosty weather."

"So you preferred breaking your own, or running the risk of it," retorted uncle Armand, laughing.

"Bah! it was worse than this when we retreated from Constantine."

"Never mind! If I had known that you were coming here, I should have thought that it was you who were calling for help just now."

"Did any one call for help? Let us go and find out who it was, then. I have about me all the requisites to dress any wound."

"Calm yourself, my dear friend. Some one certainly cried out, but there has been no more of it. Besides, I am really not altogether certain as to the cry."

"Let us hope that there was none. I don't think that any one can be out on the road to-night. I left Arthur du Pomméval and his gay party at the club. They thought of coming here in their carriages, but they were afraid of being upset, and at the present moment they are playing baccarat by way of consolation."

"The cowards!" exclaimed Germaine, "to play baccarat when two poor girls who have not waited for forty-eight hours are pining away at La Germonière is too bad."

"I confess that they deserve to be punished; but they have expensive horses, and they are careful of them. Young Pomméval has just bought an animal which cost him three hundred napoleons."

"And he had rather let us wait in solitude than risk his precious horse," said Germaine, pouting prettily. "How very gallant!"

"Tell me," resumed uncle Armand, "is this Brummell of Arcy-sur-Beuvron a rich man?"

"Rich? No. He has enough to live on; but if he goes on as he does now——"

"But hasn't he a relative who is a millionaire, and whose heir he is? Some one who lives near here? I have been told so."

"You mean Monsieur Vignemal, his mother's brother," said the doctor. "But that inheritance would not give him much of an income. It is Madame Vignemal who is the millionaire. Monsieur Vignemal had but little of his own when he married a widow almost as old as himself. It is true that since the marriage they have each made a will in favour of the one who survives; but Vignemal himself is rather shaky, while his wife is a miracle of health. She will outlive him, you may be sure of it; and Pomméval will have nothing at all, for Madame Vignemal can't bear the sight of him. I am sorry for it too, for he has more good qualities than defects; and if he became the heir to the property it would make him a very desirable suitor," concluded the doctor, glancing cautiously at Laurence.

Their eyes met, and he saw that she had not lost a word of the conversation; but she immediately averted her gaze, and began to embroider once more.

Germaine was turning over some music-books, and did not appear to be interested in the financial future of Monsieur du Pomméval. The doctor, while chatting away, had seated himself in an arm-chair, and was warming himself with natural satisfaction.

"These Vignemals are very strange neighbours," said Madame Daudierne, after a short pause. "They live but three-quarters of a mile from La Germonière. I went to see them this year, but was not admitted, and they have never returned my visit."

"They never act like anybody else," replied the doctor. "They have horses and carriages in plenty, but never use them."

"Then they must be misers," retorted Madame Daudierne.

"The nephew is a spendthrift, so that makes up for it," muttered M. Daudierne, in a contemptuous tone.

"No," said the doctor, "it isn't through avarice that they stay at home. It is for a much funnier reason. Would you believe that Madame Vignemal is as jealous as a tigress of her husband, who is fifty-five and wears a wig? I must tell you that she married him for love, but that was a quarter of a century ago. She still sees him as he was then, and fears that he may be led astray. So she keeps him in durance vile, and he submits to it. But I know from good authority that they will soon call to pay their respects to you. They have been intending to do so for three whole months, but they have always put it off and off, for the least absence from home is a mighty matter to them. However, you will see them appear when you least expect them, and in the evening, probably. Vignemal asked me the other day at what hour it would be proper to call upon you, and I took it upon myself to assure him that no one ever went to bed at La Germonière till three o'clock in the morning."

"If they would only come to-night!" cried Germaine. "What fun! They must be awfully amusing. I should really like to see them."

A serious look from Madame Daudierne silenced the young girl, who began to play the first bars of Fortunio's song very softly.

"You saucy minx!" said her uncle, "you don't need the Vignemals to

develop your love of fun. In this charming place ridiculous people are by no means scarce."

"No; but types are scarce," replied Germaine.

"What do you mean by 'types?'" asked her uncle, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

"I mean faces that don't look commonplace, distinct characters, individualities," said Mademoiselle Daudierne.

"The deuce you do! Why, niece, you express yourself very well indeed! I should really like to know where you got hold of this fine style of talk."

"I got it from the newspapers which mamma sometimes lets me read," said Germaine. "But you must confess that I am right. All the stylish young men of Arcy dress and talk in the same way; all the residents are exactly alike. When you have seen one you have seen a hundred. I thought that it would be different with the peasantry, but I was mightily mistaken. I have not seen one that hadn't tow-coloured hair, a chalky complexion, a red nose, round shoulders, and sly eyes. Hereabouts the race is both vulgar and ugly."

"I presume that you will make an exception in favour of Monsieur Arthur du Pomméval."

"Oh! he is a different kind of person. He is something of a Parisian, and would make a very passable hero of romance if he did not part his hair in the middle and comb his whiskers so smoothly."

"Would you prefer a Fra Diavolo?"

"Perhaps I should," was Germaine's reply.

"Well, then, mademoiselle, I know exactly who would suit you," said Dr. Subligny, smiling.

"What, have you any Calabrian brigands in the neighbourhood of La Germonière?" asked the young girl, pertly.

"No, very fortunately. But there is a savage who camps upon your land, although you know nothing about it."

"Tell me where he is, so that I may run and see him."

"He is sometimes in your wood, sometimes on your river. He is a nomad who lives upon your game and your fish."

"Is he young?"

"He is twenty, and has a magnificent head."

"Good! we will take his portrait; not I, for I draw badly, but Laurence, who is a fine artist."

"Thank you," said the elder sister, curtly. "I don't like savages, and I don't at all care to paint this Mohican."

"I doubt very much whether he would consent to sit for his portrait," remarked Dr. Subligny.

"Never mind. I should like to see him," said Germaine.

"So should I, so as to make out a good case against him," said her uncle, "for this redskin poaches upon the preserves of La Germonière, and richly deserves to be punished. But what is the matter, Baptiste?" broke off Monsieur Daudierne, addressing an old man-servant who had entered the room. "What do you look so scared about?"

"There has been an accident, sir," stammered the servant.

"An accident? Where? Who has met with it?"

"On the river, sir."

"Oh! I knew I had heard some cries. Some drunken peasant has fallen into the water, I suppose?" asked uncle Armand.

"No, sir. It seems that Monsieur and Madame Vignemal got into the ferry-boat to cross the Beuvron, when the wind broke the rope and the boat upset."

"Oh, heavens!" exclaimed Madame Daudierne, "they are drowned!—drowned in coming to see us!—for they were coming here, I am sure of it. The ferry-boat is at the end of the garden. How terrible!"

"Let us go to them," said Germaine; "there may yet be time to save them."

"Roch says it is too late, mademoiselle," rejoined the servant. "He witnessed the accident twenty minutes ago."

"Roch! Who is Roch?"

"Roch Ferrer, the savage whom I was talking about," said the doctor. "If he didn't save them it is because it was impossible to do so, for he swims like a pike and dives like an otter. The husband and wife perished together, there's no doubt of it. It is a strange accident, and the event will most likely alter Arthur du Pomméval's prospects."

"Who cares what it does for Monsieur du Pomméval?" cried Germaine. "What we ought to do is to go straight to the spot and try to revive these poor people. Drowned persons have been restored to life after being an hour under water, have they not, doctor?"

"Very seldom, mademoiselle—very seldom," replied Dr. Subligny, not without a slight smile. "But we ought not to neglect anything, even in the most desperate cases. I am going to the place. The question is whether we shall find the bodies."

"Roch has tried to do so, sir," said the servant. "But the current is so strong that they were borne away. Not even the boat was to be seen."

"I was sure that the brave fellow risked his life to save them. He is as bold as a lion," remarked the doctor.

"I forgive him, then, for not having let us know before," said M. Daudierne. "I think that we ought to make another search. I will accompany you, doctor, and we will take all the servants with us; they will help us in searching along the banks of the Beuvron. Your heroic poacher will serve us as a guide."

"Roch has gone back there, sir," said the old servant. "He probably wants to dive again for the bodies."

"Well, we shall see him, then, for he will be coming up to take breath," rejoined uncle Armand. "It is a splendid moonlight night. Come, doctor! And don't distress yourself, my dear Reine, I beg of you. When persons are as nervous as you are, excitement is very dangerous. The doctor will tell you so."

"How can I help being distressed? I cannot prevent myself from thinking that I am partly the cause of our neighbours' death," replied Madame Daudierne.

"Because you imagine that they came out expressly to visit you. There is nothing to prove that such is the case. But this is no time for discussion. Come, doctor, let us go! Baptiste, go down to the kitchen and tell the coachman and gardener to take their lanterns and come with us."

"You will take me with you, won't you, uncle?" said Germaine. "I shall only be a minute putting on a cloak and hood."

"Take you with me! No, indeed! You have nothing to do with it. I hope that your mother will keep you from going out."

And without stopping to lecture his venturesome niece, Armand Daudierne left the room. The doctor followed him, and put on his broad-brimmed hat and wolfskin overcoat; while Madame Daudierne's brother-in-law assumed a quilted wrap and fur-bound cap.

Germaine would have been glad to form one of the party, but Madame Daudierne held her back and remonstrated with her. Thereupon Laurence—the serious Laurence—profiting by the opportunity when unobserved, opened the door and said, “You will try to return soon, I hope. I have not said anything, for I was too much overcome to speak; but I beg that you will let us have some news as soon as possible, good or bad. This suspense will be very hard to bear.”

“Calm yourself, my dear girl; we won't lose a moment. I advise you, however, not to indulge in any false hopes. Monsieur Vignemal is in the river, and so is his wife, and they will not come out of it alive.”

As her uncle spoke, he hastened outside. Dr. Subligny was already at the door, going as lightly and actively down the steps as any young man could have done. Baptiste was waiting for them. The lantern-bearers were ready and went on ahead, in obedience to M. Daudierne's orders.

The wind was blowing hard, and scattered the fine flakes of snow which were falling. The chestnut-trees in the park bent under the ever-recurring blasts coming from the north, and the noise of the tall pines shaking reminded one of the roar of the sea at high tide. The darkened sky grew brighter at times, when the clouds were dispersed by the gale, and then the full moon shed its pallid rays upon the wintry scene. The park extended very far on both sides of the house, but it was not very wide. The river intersected it some two or three hundred paces from the entrance of the house.

A straight path led to the shore, a long embankment, adorned with a row of tamarisks, which furnished a pleasant shade in the summer; but now with the wind in their boughs they made the scene more wintry still. The valley of the Beuvron is shut in everywhere, and the gales there are sometimes most furious. The thickness of the trees and the dense thickets on the left shore hide from view the somewhat dilapidated manor where the Vignemals resided. This manor, called “Le Fougeray” or “Brake,” belonged to Madame Vignemal, the wife, who had inherited it from her father, and it had never been repaired either before or since her marriage. Around the manor the lands were almost entirely unproductive, for the husband understood nothing whatever about agriculture. The forests were thick and wild, for there were no paths through them, and on this side of the Beuvron everything was disorderly and poorly tilled, while on the right shore, where lay Madame Daudierne's estate, the appearance was that of the gardens of some large villa in the suburbs of Paris. Uncle Armand preferred civilisation round about a country seat, and had refused to visit the opposite shore.

This night, however, he went boldly ahead, without caring for the snow which stung his face, and appeared determined to do everything in his power to help the unlucky couple, whose way of life he was so far from admiring. It is true that the doctor, who was his elder by fifteen years, gave him a good example. He ran rather than walked, the worthy man! There were two lives to be saved, and in such cases he never spared himself.

“Before I went out,” he said, “I ought to have given orders to have some blankets warmed to wrap up the victims, if we should succeed in

finding their bodies, and some curry-combs ought to be at hand to rub them with. That is the first thing to be done. But I forgot it. See what it is to grow old! The news of this disaster quite upset me. It is a strange occurrence."

"Very strange, indeed," said M. Daudierne. "What could have made these Vignemals get into such a wretched boat to come to call on us? Are there no bridges about here?"

"There is one up the stream, but it is necessary to go two miles out of the way to reach it, and the ferry boat was near at hand. They wouldn't go in one of their vehicles for fear of hurting the horses."

"What weather, too, for paying visits!" rejoined uncle Armand. "I declare on my honour that I think this rustic couple must have been out of their senses. If it has cost them their lives, they certainly have themselves to thank for it. Between ourselves, I don't care a straw about the matter, but I am sorry for my sister-in-law, who is very sensitive, and her daughters are like her in that respect."

"Especially the elder one," replied Dr. Subigny.

"Oh, for that matter Germaine is the same, although she shows it less. But Laurence feels more deeply, because she keeps her feelings to herself, and I dread excitement for her. She is my favourite, and I will tell you why one of these days. But our servants seem to be on the bank. I see that they are running; let us make haste. The lanterns are moving on."

With a few strides they reached the foot of a grassy slope, and ran up the embankment below which the Beuvron ran. The waters, swollen by the rain which lately had fallen, were rushing rapidly along between the two steep banks, and the wind at times raised perfect waves. The river, usually so tranquil, now positively looked like a torrent.

"I don't wonder in the least that the Vignemal couple—old Philemon Daudierne. "They fell into a perfect floodgate. I flatter myself that I and Baucis—were drowned and carried heaven knows where," remarked M. can swim tolerably well, but I don't think that I could do so here. If your savage comes up in a rush like this, he must be very skilful. By-the-bye, where is he? Has he sunk as well?"

"Baptiste," called out the doctor, "where is Roch?"

"We are looking for him, sir," replied the old servant.

"He may have crossed the river and returned to his hut," said the doctor.

"His hut? Where does he live?" asked uncle Armand.

"I believe," rejoined M. Subigny, "that for several weeks past he has been living in a kind of hut, made of leaves and branches. He has had some words with Madame Vignemal about this unlawful dwelling of his, for she does not like to have her rights as a landowner interfered with. But he doesn't care either for her or for the police. No one has ever been able to capture him. I am the only man whom he ever makes a show of obeying, and whose advice he sometimes follows. I must tell you that I cured him of a fracture of the humerus, and that he feels grateful to me for doing so."

"It is very fortunate that he does. Where did this man of the woods come from?" asked old M. Daudierne. "Was he born in this country?"

"No, but he came here when he was quite a lad. His father was a Spanish gipsy who roamed about, buying up old iron and cropping horses. This is a common occupation with his race. However, the man was found dead one morning beside a ditch at Arcy. The child was standing beside

the body, but was not weeping. The 'Brothers of the Christian Doctrine' then took charge of him, and brought him up till he was fifteen years old."

"I can guess the rest," said uncle Armand. "As soon as he was able to get his living by poaching, his instincts got the upper hand, and he ran off. But I am talking at a bad time, and we have something better to do."

"I don't see what we can do," was the doctor's response. "We have no means of dragging the river, and, besides, the bodies must be far off by this time. I had some hope that Roch might have succeeded in bringing them ashore, and in that case I should have tried to bring about a restoration, which would have been little less than miraculous, but if he gave up looking for them we cannot effect anything."

"I fear not; but I am of the opinion, my dear doctor, that we had better follow the embankment to the end of the park in order to make sure that the bodies have not been stranded. The Beuvron has some very sharp turns, and a body carried along by the tide may have been stopped by a natural barrier."

"You are right," rejoined M. Subligny, at once. "We must look everywhere."

"Down the stream, of course. The ferry-boat was here, I believe?" remarked uncle Armand.

"Yes, sir," said Baptiste; "here is the path to the water's-edge, and the rope which reached from one bank to the other is still hanging by one end to the stake, on this side. It must have snapped in the middle, and there ought to have been a new one, but then the ferry-boat was very seldom used."

"For that matter a ship-cable wouldn't have held against such a hurricane. But the boat cannot have sunk at once, and we must look lower down. Go on with your lantern, Baptiste, and light us."

"Here is Roch, sir," at this moment exclaimed the gardener, who had gone on ahead. "He is running towards us."

"So he is," chimed in the doctor. "I can always recognise him by his figure. He stands five feet nine."

"He is running as fast as he can," was uncle Armand's remark. "He must have something to tell us, or he wouldn't be in such a hurry as that."

In a few seconds Roch Ferrer came up to Monsieur Subligny, and said, pantingly: "I have found the woman."

"Is she still alive?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know! Did you only see her in the water?"

"Excuse me; I took hold of her. I tried to raise her up so as to bring her here on my back, but I couldn't manage it."

"What! so strong as you are, too?"

"Strength has nothing to do with it. Her legs were caught in the roots of an old willow, and it is impossible for me to detach the body without help."

"But you ought not to have left her there. Supposing she was not dead then, she must be so now if you left her in that position."

"If she is, it is no fault of mine. I placed her with her head and the upper part of her body out of the water, and I laid her upon the shore, which is sloping."

"The head higher than the feet, of course?" said the doctor. "That was right. You did the best thing you could do, although you didn't

know it. There is one chance in a hundred that she is not quite dead; but let us make haste. Is the spot far off?"

"A hundred paces from here. You know the place: it is at the first turn in the river. There is a projection."

"Ah! I know it. It is there that the former owner was drowned."

"Oh, it is a bad spot," said Roch Ferrer. "There is an eddy there, and when any one falls in there's no getting out again."

These words came to an end, and Armand Daudierne had scarcely any time to look at this strange young fellow, who seemed more like a highwayman than a rescuer of the drowned. The old bachelor could see in the dim moonlight that he was very tall and well built, and that he was clad from head to foot in the skins of animals, like an Esquimaux or a Samoied. Everybody hurried on. The snow still fell, and the hurricane was violent, but it blew up the river, and was consequently behind the party.

"Have you seen anything of Monsieur Vignemal?" said Monsieur Daudierne to Roch, who was ahead of him.

"No," drily answered the young man, turning round to examine his questioner from head to foot. He was probably surprised at being familiarly addressed by a man whom he had never seen before.

"He must be dead, then. Let us hasten to his wife's assistance," promptly exclaimed uncle Armand.

"I am very much afraid that she is in as bad a plight," muttered Monsieur Subligny. "The stranding of the body doesn't prove that she was still alive. But we shall soon see."

"Here we are!" said Roch, pointing to a break in the row of tamarisks. Here's the willow-tree below us. The lady is lying on the gravel there."

The doctor went first, and uncle Armand followed closely, calling out to Baptiste: "Bring your lantern. The moon is behind a cloud, and we cannot see at all." A moment afterwards he exclaimed, addressing Monsieur Subligny, "What the mischief does this mean? The body isn't here. Your savage has been making fun of us."

"Let us look for it," replied the doctor. "Hold your lantern here, Baptiste. Come and help us, Roch. But, first of all, you must tell me where you placed Madame Vignemal."

"There, on the slope," replied Roch, who had made but one leap from the summit of the declivity to the edge of the water. "But she isn't here now. I don't understand it. The large stone which I placed under her head has not been stirred. The tide must have taken the body off. Yes, look! The willow has been dragged up by the roots; the body has flowed on; and now the tree will fall, for it is quite loose."

"That is true. Nothing can stand against this villanous river when it is swollen and there is a north-east wind. But, indeed, my lad, it was a bad idea of yours to leave the poor woman here: you ought to have remained near her, and have called out for help."

"Yes, I see that I ought to have done so. That will teach me not to trust a willow-tree again," was Roch's rejoinder.

"But it is clear that the poor woman must have been dead," said the doctor, "for she had been twenty minutes in the water before she was thrown ashore at this spot. I should have been glad to have tried to revive her, to satisfy my own feelings on the subject. Now, however, all hope is at an end, and we can only return."

"Not till I have told this fellow what I think of him!" exclaimed Monsieur Daudierne.

"Are you speaking of me?" asked Roch, raising his head.

"Yes, I am, you rascal! Tell us what you mean by your behaviour, instead of undertaking to be insolent. Your conduct is very strange, and for all I know you may have helped to drown the people whom you say you tried to save."

Roch drew back a couple of paces and made ready, like a horse about to leap a ditch. But the doctor, who knew him, threw himself before him, and stopped him by a single gesture.

"Don't you see that I have run the risk of being drowned?" said the young fellow, approaching near Baptiste, who held the lantern. His face, hands, and garments were certainly dripping with water. "I have dived three times," he resumed, "and I might have remained quietly upon the bank of the river. No one would have found fault with me if I had, for no one knew that I was there. Dive yourself, if you like! Perhaps you may then fish up Monsieur or Madame Vignemal."

The reply was an apt one, and uncle Armand said no more. Roch's tone and manner impressed him. No guilty man would have defended himself in such a way. This outcast's proud and wild demeanour did not displease him, and he began to feel an interest in him.

"Let us return to the embankment," said Subigny; "the soil isn't firm here, and if we remain the Beuvron will carry us away as well."

"It is freezing, too, and the snow stings my face," grumbled Monsieur Daudierne, climbing with difficulty up the steep slope.

"Roch," said the doctor, "you must come with us to La Germonière. There is a good fire in the kitchen, and you must warm yourself."

"I don't need to do so, sir, and I had better return home," replied Roch Ferrer, quietly.

"Where is your home?"

"Near here. It is in the forest, above the place where the boat is kept."

"On the other side of the river, then? You will be obliged to swim back, so as to sleep in your hole, where a fox would freeze. I forbid it, my lad."

"But, sir——"

"It is no use your talking! It is my order, and if you don't obey me, I promise you that the first time you break a limb, which is sure to happen soon enough with the life you lead, I shall let you get out of the scrape the best way you can. Besides, you must tell us how the accident happened, as you were there and saw it all."

"Oh, that won't take long," replied Roch. "I had just stretched myself out in my hut when I heard some footsteps and voices. I crept along to the edge of the path, for I thought that it was the two gamekeepers from Le Fougeray who were trying to find me. But I recognised Monsieur Vignemal and his wife coming down with their servant behind them, and I saw that they were about to cross the river."

"So they had a servant with them," muttered Armand Daudierne; and he added aloud, "What became of him, my lad? Was he drowned with his employers?"

"No. They got into the boat, and he would have done the same, but he had remained on shore to unfasten the chain which held the boat to its moorings. He had no sooner done so than the tide swept the boat aside, and the rope broke. Thereupon the servant began to shout for help."

"It was he, then! He called so loud that I heard him in my sister-in-law's drawing-room," said uncle Armand.

"Likely enough," retorted Roch Ferrer. "The wind at that time was blowing towards La Germonière. But the fellow didn't call out long. When he saw the boat drifting away as fast as it could, he lost his head and ran off."

"Then he must have returned to Le Fougeray," said the doctor. "He ought at least to have brought some one to help his master and mistress. It is said, however, that their servants did not like them."

"That is true," replied Roch Ferrer; "and that is why, instead of going to their own house, I went to La Germonière after I had done all that I could to find them in the water."

"But you dived after them first of all, my good fellow, didn't you?" asked the doctor.

"Oh yes, sir, without losing a second; and I thought that I should be able to save them, for the end of the rope was floating on the water. If I could have caught hold of it I could have gradually dragged the boat back again."

"That would not have been very easy," remarked the doctor, incredulously.

"I could have managed it, though," said Roch. "The boat was spinning round like a top, and I swam straight on and was nearing it so closely that I could see Monsieur and Madame Vignemal as plainly as I see you. The husband was seated at the lower end of the boat, and had his face hidden in his hands. His wife was standing up, and I think that she must have thought of throwing off some of her clothes, for she was unfastening her bodice, and I thought that she took something from her bosom. I could not tell what it was, however."

"Perhaps it was her purse. They say she had a mania for carrying her money and papers about with her."

"All I can say," resumed Roch Ferrer, "is that at the moment when I called out to them not to be afraid, the boat struck against a rock in the middle of the river. Ah! it soon sank, and it disappeared after that."

"But you plunged in?"

"Yes; and if I came up without either of the bodies it was only because I could not breathe any longer under water. But I plunged again, further ahead, and then again, still further on—you know that I am as familiar with the bottom of the Beuvron as I am with the top of it. Still I found nothing. It is my own fault; I ought to have gone on as far as the old willow, but I was quite exhausted."

"I should think so, indeed," said Monsieur Daudierne, who was really touched by this simple narrative.

"I knew that you had not deserted them," exclaimed the doctor. "You did even more than you were called upon to do."

"No," said Roch, "I thought too late of that projecting part of the shore where the woman's body stranded. I ought also to have remembered that the roots of that tree might break; but they seemed firm enough."

"Nothing can resist water," remarked Dr. Subligny. "Tell me now. When you raised Madame Vignemal out of the water was there any warmth remaining in her body?—did she still breathe?"

"I don't think she did. It seemed to me that she stirred when I laid her upon the shore, but I am perhaps mistaken. The only thing I am

sure about is that her hands were clenched. She seemed to be holding something very tightly, and her arms were as stiff as iron."

"Then it was as I thought," exclaimed the doctor, "she was dead! I could not have been of any service to her whatever. That thought somewhat consoles me. Go on, my lad, and when you have been made comfortable again at the château, you will be free to go wherever you like. But you must come with us for the present. I have a few more words to say to you, and I don't care to talk out here in such weather."

Roch hesitated. He evidently did not care to dry his clothes at the kitchen fire. But he respected Monsieur Subligny, and did not dare to thwart him. So he went ahead without a word, and met and joined Madame Daudierne's servants, who formed a vanguard.

"You are right now," said uncle Armand to the doctor. "This poacher of yours is quite a character."

"He isn't a poacher in the true sense of the word, for he never sells the game he traps or the fish he catches. He makes them into roasts and fries. I have tasted his open-air cookery, and I can assure you that it is excellent. But he doesn't care for money. He wouldn't know what to do with it. He dresses himself in foxskins and makes his caps of otter."

"Why, he ought to have been born in Canada!" exclaimed Monsieur Daudierne. "I have a good mind to ask my sister-in-law to make a game-keeper of him."

"He wouldn't take the place; he is too fond of his liberty," was Dr. Subligny's reply. "Madame Vignemal tried to engage him, but he would never consent. He preferred to live at war with her, and she finally got tired of tracking him."

"Between ourselves, doctor," resumed uncle Armand, "it isn't the right kind of life for a man to lead, and there is every reason to fear that this lad will come to a bad end. I will confess to you that I thought for a moment that he had something to do with the drowning of our unfortunate neighbours."

"He has told you the truth in every particular. I will take my oath he has; for ever since he came into the world he has never uttered a falsehood. Besides, the Vignemals' servant was there when the accident happened, and he will relate what he saw himself."

"Oh, I don't suspect your gipsy now," responded M. Daudierne, swiftly. "By the way, how old is he?"

"He does not know himself. He must have been born on some highway or in the depths of some forest, and there was no one there to make out a certificate of birth. This is why he has not been called upon to serve as a soldier."

"It is a pity, indeed, for he is well fitted to wear a uniform; and though I have not been able to study his face, it seems to me that his head is a perfect model. But to return to the sad fate of the Vignemals. Don't you think that there is still something that we might do?—not to save them, as they both are dead; but there are persons who ought to be informed of the occurrence as soon as possible."

"I shall be at Arcy in an hour's time," replied Dr. Subligny, "and I will undertake to inform any one who may be interested in the matter, such as the mayor and the public prosecutor. They will give orders to search for the bodies, and I shall probably be called upon to examine them. I will now take leave of Madame Daudierne and your charming nieces."

"You won't be obliged to go up-stairs to do that, for I see the girls at the kitchen door, and I don't think that their mother is far off. There! they are talking to Baptiste. I am glad of it, for we shan't be the first to tell the sad news. Ah! they are going into the house again; the servants are with them, and Roch has made no difficulty about going in as well. Let us do the same, doctor; we shall be more comfortable indoors than here."

The kitchen was as large as the guard-room of a mediæval fortress, and some huge logs were blazing in the fireplace, contributing to the illumination of the room, which was furthermore lighted by three large lamps hanging from the ceiling. Madame Daudierne had not come down, but her daughters had hastily questioned the old servant, and when uncle Armand appeared among them they already knew the fate of the Vignemals.

Laurence was paler than usual, and had tears in her eyes. "Is it true, uncle, that there is no hope?" she asked in an agitated tone.

"None whatever, my dear child! All that was in the power of any one to do has been done to rescue them. Nothing was done by me, however, for I arrived too late, and our good doctor had no opportunity for displaying his skill, for there was no patient to attend to. The river has carried the bodies of our unfortunate neighbours far away. But I will show you a brave young man who has risked his life—Where is he?—where is my hero? Ah! he is hiding in the corner by the fireplace. Come now, Roch, let us have a look at you! You are worth looking at, do you know. Come, now!"

Roch very reluctantly stepped forth from his retreat, and the full light fell upon him. He had taken off his otter-skin cap, and the brown ringlets of his naturally curling hair fell in disorderly fashion upon his low but well-shaped brow. His nose was straight like that of a Greek statue, his complexion olive, and his lips full, but red as a pomegranate blossom; his large eyes, moreover, sparkled like black diamonds—and they were eloquent eyes indeed—as they gazed persistently at Laurence.

"Upon my word, he is a handsome young man!" exclaimed Monsieur Daudierne, who never disguised his thoughts in the least, but expressed them in the most decided manner.

"The doctor told us so," said Germaine, giddily, coming nearer to look closer at the gipsy, who was not disconcerted by her childish curiosity, for he did not observe it. Roch only had eyes for the elder sister, who gazed at him as though he had been a rare bird or a bit of Japanese bronze—that is, with interest, but without emotion.

Germaine was much more animated, but she did not stop to contemplate the form and features of the young outlaw who so greatly resembled the Indian Bacchus. She at once thought of the heroic act which her uncle had spoken of.

"You have risked your life, sir," she said warmly to Roch Ferrer. "I am glad to see you. I like such people, and I hope that you will often come to La Germonière. My mother, I am sure of it, will wish to thank you herself."

Roch, somewhat astonished at being addressed as "sir," bowed without replying. He seemed to be waiting for a word from Mademoiselle Laurence.

The word was not spoken, however, and Monsieur Daudierne, to curtail admiration and compliments alike, exclaimed, "My friend, you won't refuse, I hope, to go shooting with me some day. Monsieur Subigny has

told me what a good shot you are, and I should very much like to see you try your skill with my sister-in-law's game."

"You are very kind, sir," stammered Roch; "but——"

"I warn you that if you don't come of your own accord, I shall hunt you up. I insist upon going out shooting in your company. If the snow prevents us from doing so, my nieces will take your likeness."

"My sister will sketch your portrait," said Germaine, "but I shall only look on while you sit for it."

"We must find out what our mother has to say on the subject," remarked Laurence, quietly.

"I will undertake to arrange all that," resumed their uncle. "I count upon you, my dear lad!"

"I will come, sir," replied Roch, after a moment's silence.

"That's right. Don't make me wait for you, or I shall think that you have a grudge against me for the hasty words which I regret having spoken."

"Roch is too clever a lad to remember that," said the doctor. "If you do as I advise, my boy, you will stay all night at La Germonière and sleep here. Unless you do, you will have an attack of pleurisy! Besides, you will have to come to see me to-morrow at Arcy. I shall need you to explain what has happened to the magistrate who will have charge of the inquest, and I must keep him from questioning you too harshly. You are not a very well-behaved young man in the eyes of the law; and if I don't guarantee that you are telling the truth, the authorities might not accept your deposition without looking into it very closely."

"I will be with you before noon," replied Roch, but without adding that he accepted the proffered hospitality. He bowed with a good grace, and leant against the mantelshelf as before. Laurence contented herself with returning his bow, but Germaine smiled upon him, and made him a sign with her little white hand, which was as much as to say, "Good-bye for the present."

"Have you found the admirer you were talking about?" asked her uncle, slyly, as they went upstairs. "It appears to me that this young fellow is the kind of person that you referred to."

"Oh! uncle," replied Germaine, "I didn't go as far as that. I certainly hope to marry to suit my fancy, but a husband who lives in the forest wouldn't suit me at all."

"Oh, you may just as well give up this one," replied Monsieur Daudierne, for the sake of keeping up the joke. "He scarcely looked at you, but your sister absolutely fascinated him. He devoured her with his eyes, and seemed to be afraid to stir."

"I didn't observe that I produced any such effect," said Mademoiselle Laurence, rather haughtily.

"Well, what news?" anxiously asked Madame Daudierne, who had come out upon the landing.

"Bad news, my dear Reine," was uncle Armand's prompt reply.

"What! are they lost? both lost?"

"Without any chance of their being found. Heaven only knows whether their bodies will be recovered. Perhaps they will never be found at all. The Beuvron is only a great brook, but it might as well be a flood, for it goes straight to the sea."

"Oh, the bodies will not go so far," interposed the doctor. "The swell which caused this disaster will not continue, and as soon as the waters

fall the corpses will be stranded somewhere. Let us hope so, for it would be very vexatious if the deaths could not be legally proved."

"Vexatious, indeed, for the young man who has behaved so heroically yet may be brought into question!" said M. Daudierne. "Bah! I will help you to defend him. He did not inspire me with great confidence at first, but now I will answer for him."

This conversation, begun in the hall, ended by the fireside. Madame Daudierne was trembling all over, and her daughters stood beside her.

"You are distressing yourself beyond all reason," said her brother-in-law to her. "I pity Monsieur and Madame Vignemal from the bottom of my heart; but I never saw them, nor did you."

"I ought to have had that dreadful boat repaired," rejoined Madame Daudierne, despondently.

"Why? You never used it that I know of, and the other day, when I was examining your deeds, I found out that the keeping of the ferry in repair was your neighbours' business. You have nothing to reproach yourself with, and you ought to leave it to their heirs to shed tears over their death," added uncle Armand, philosophically.

"I doubt whether they will shed many tears," muttered the doctor. "I only know but one of them, and he was somewhat at variance with his uncle Vignemal; moreover, he was quite out of the good graces of his aunt by marriage. She had taken a dislike to him, and as she led her husband by the nose——"

"Ah! so young Pomméval was not much liked at Le Fougeray. I felt sure of it from the way he spoke of the Vignemals," interrupted uncle Armand. "But how in the world is he the heir? You said that he was not a little while ago. You even went into very precise details on the subject. The tender pair had made wills in each other's favour, and the entire fortune was on the wife's side. She has just perished at the same time with her husband. Can you tell me which of the two is the 'survivor?'"

"No; but the law provides for such a case. Where there is no certainty on which one can base the order of inheritance, it is regulated by the age of the deceased."

"I remember now that I have heard that before, but I had quite forgotten it, and I have not got all the clauses of the Civil Code in my head. It seems to me, however, that the younger person is presumed to be the survivor. That is logical."

"Not always. For after fifteen years of age the elder person is supposed to be the stronger," remarked Dr. Subligny.

"Good! But our neighbours were much more than fifteen," was uncle Armand's retort.

"The husband must have been fifty-five, the wife fifty-four at least. I am sure that there was not six months between them."

"What does that matter? If the husband were the elder, the wife inherited."

"I don't know anything about it, for I am quite unacquainted with legal matters. But it seems to me that, in determining the legal presumption as to survival, the sex as well as the age of deceased persons is considered."

"Really, gentlemen," said Madame Daudierne, "I cannot understand how, when such a misfortune has just happened, you can possibly discuss a question of inheritance, and one which does not interest any of us."

"It concerns some one whom we know, and greatly too; and as I did not know the deceased persons at all, it is quite natural that I should ask what chances there are Monsieur du Pomméval becoming a millionaire. Except for a few trifling faults, he is a charming fellow."

"He leads a dance better than any one I know," said Germaine, maliciously.

"Leaders of dances have been known to make excellent husbands, *mademoiselle*," said her uncle, with assumed gravity. "But at this moment the question is whether he is entitled to take possession of *Le Fougeray*."

"I shall be able to tell you all about it to-morrow," said Monsieur Subigny. "In a little town like Arcy uncertainty as to a matter of inheritance does not last long. The news of the accident will no sooner spread through Arcy than the question will be settled. Everybody is a lawyer in Normandy."

"I don't doubt it; but if there were a copy of the Code at La Germonière we might settle the question at once. Unfortunately, these young ladies read nothing but novels, and I read nothing but newspapers."

"A Code?" said Laurence, "my brother has one."

"Yes, of course he has; he is supposed to be studying law! I did not think of that. But he is in Paris, this studious brother of yours."

"Oh yes; but when he goes there," rejoined Germaine, promptly, "he only takes his light literature with him."

"I am sure of that," exclaimed uncle Armand in an ironical tone. "But we want to know where he has put this Code of his which he has probably never so much as opened."

"I saw it this morning in his bedroom," said Laurence.

"Then he must read it to send himself to sleep," resumed M. Daudierne, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Shall I go to look for it, uncle?" asked Laurence.

"I should certainly like to look at it, my dear child."

When the elder girl had left the parlour, Monsieur Daudierne turned to Germaine and said: "You couldn't find a law-book, I'll be bound. I'll bet anything that you don't even know what a Code is."

"I beg your pardon, my dear uncle. It is a big book with coloured edges, and shaped like a block. As to looking into it, I confess that I have never as much as opened it. Laws are not for me. My code is here," said Germaine, putting her hand upon her heart.

"If you regulate yourself by that code you will commit many a folly," replied her uncle. "Don't listen to this little girl, doctor, but tell us who are Madame Vignemal's heirs."

"Oh, she has several cousins, of both sexes, and all of them are as poor as Job himself. Her father made a great deal of money as a dealer, but his 'collaterals' remained mere peasants, and she would never receive them. There was but one in whom she was formerly interested. He was an orphan, and as he seemed a rather promising young fellow, she made up her mind to pay for his education. She placed him at a school in Paris, and she took it into her head that he should become a judge. She thought, perhaps, that he would be a magistrate at Arcy, some day or other, and would help her to gain her lawsuits. The worthy lady spent her life in going to law, and was in difficulties with all her neighbours."

"Excepting my sister-in-law."

"Oh, she would have attacked her, too, sooner or later! She was quarrelsome and capricious beyond anything you can imagine. But to

return to the little cousin for whom she had a liking, I shan't surprise you by stating that she soon grew tired of taking care of him. Poor Roger had no liking whatever for the law. When he left school he did not return to this place, and since then no one has known anything about him."

"Is his name Roger? His first name, I mean?" said Germaine.

"Yes, mademoiselle; Roger Pontac."

"That's short and sweet. I like that name, Roger Pontac. So no one knows what became of him?"

"That is because no one took the trouble to inquire. Madame Vignemal perhaps knew; I myself have thought that the young fellow may have enlisted, and I should not be at all surprised if he had made his way. He was an intelligent young man, and did not know the meaning of the word fear."

"You will see that he will be a general some day or other. That will be better than being Madame Vignemal's heir."

Madame Daudierne was about to renew her protest against this conversation, which she thought altogether inappropriate at such a time, when Laurence reappeared carrying a large octavo volume.

"Thank you, little girl!" said her uncle. "Hand me that interesting work, for I see that you are bending beneath its weight. Alfred has purchased a large-sized book, but he has never used it. The leaves all stick together still. Do you know how to look for what we want to ascertain, doctor?"

"I will try to find it," said Dr. Subligny. "What we need must be in the chapter on inheritance."

"Our dear friend Arthur du Pomméval little thinks that we are talking about him now," said Monsieur Daudierne, while the doctor turned over the leaves.

"Ah! I have found the place," exclaimed Monsieur Subligny. "Book III., Chapter ii., Clause 720."

"Well, then, read clause 720, my friend."

"It says:—'If several persons reciprocally will the property to one another and die at the same time, and it is not possible to tell which died the first——'"

"That is the case here," interrupted Monsieur Daudierne. "Monsieur and Madame Vignemal, each left their property to the one of them who survived the other, and goodness only knows which of the two that was."

"I will proceed," said the doctor. "'The presumption as to survival is determined by the facts of the case.'"

"Then it would be in favour of the wife, for we are not positively sure that she was dead when the body was stranded."

"By the circumstances of the case," resumed Dr. Subligny, continuing his perusal, "and, failing these, by the age or sex of the deceased." You see: the sex."

"What else does the book say?"

"The rest of it is in clause 721, which sets forth that under fifteen the elder is presumed to be the survivor, and over sixty, the younger."

"Go on! go on!" cried uncle Armand, impatiently, "that doesn't concern the Vignemals. Between fifteen and sixty it is always the youngest, is it not?"

"Yes. Clause 722 says that in this case the inheritance devolves 'in natural order.'"

"Then the wife inherited from the husband," exclaimed M. Daudierne, "and Arthur du Pomméval will not get a copper."

"You don't let me finish. It says: 'If they are of the same sex.'"

"Well; and what if they are not of the same sex?" asked uncle Armand, pertinently enough.

"The male is always supposed to have survived if they are of the same age, or if the difference is not more than a year."

"The deuce! That would change everything, if, as you said just now, Monsieur Vignemal was but six months older than his wife."

"Six months at the very most," was Dr. Subigny's prompt response.

"Well, but the wise legislator has provided for everything. Thanks to him, our friend Pomméval will become a 'big man.' What fortune did the Vignemals leave?"

"They were supposed," said Dr. Subigny, "to have an income of fifty thousand francs a year, and as they did not spend half of it they must have doubled their capital. The nephew will be the richest landholder in this part of the country, for the clauses which I have read to you are very clear, and I don't doubt but what his rights will be recognised at once. The cousins of Madame Vignemal will dispute the case, no doubt, but they will lose their suit. As for Roger Pontac, he won't bring forward his rights; he isn't aware that his relative is dead, and even if he were, I am sure he wouldn't claim anything. He really cares nothing at all about money, and this fortune will be better placed with Arthur du Pomméval than with him."

"What, what! doctor?" exclaimed M. Daudierne in surprise. "It seems to me that the handsome Arthur is somewhat of a spendthrift."

"Yes, because he is sowing his wild oats. But I know him. He will change by-and-bye. Economy is in the blood of all the people here. For him to become a settled man he only needs to marry, especially if he has the good luck to meet with a serious young lady properly brought up—a girl whose steady disposition——"

"Those stones are not thrown into my garden," exclaimed Germaine, with a burst of laughter.

Laurence blushed a deep scarlet; Madame Daudierne bit her lip; her brother frowned, and the worthy old doctor, realising that he was going too fast and too far, immediately added, "I see that it is growing very late. Allow me, my dear madame, to take my leave."

"You mustn't walk home," exclaimed uncle Armand. "Here comes Baptiste with some tea. You must take a cup with us while the horse is put to the brougham to take you back to Arcy." And turning to the servant, he added, "Has the young man below had his supper?"

"No, sir," replied Baptiste. "He would not take any, and, in fact, he went off, running like a madman."

"We shall have a great deal of trouble in making him sit for his portrait," exclaimed Germaine on hearing this.

The doctor, on his side, raised his hands towards heaven. He began to despair of civilising his savage, and made up his mind to accept his host's offers. "These serious matters must wait till to-morrow," he said, seating himself again; and he did not think, perhaps, that he spoke so truly.

II.

IN the north-west of France intensely cold weather is never of long duration. The sea is not far off, and the Gulf stream from America unceasingly tempers the climate of these damp regions. It often rains, but it rarely freezes, especially in autumn, and towards mid November St. Martin's summer never fails to make the latter end of the season agreeable.

The hurricane which had proved so fatal to Madame Daudierne's country neighbours was already over when the sun shone forth on the morning after the catastrophe. The first rays of the orb of day melted the snow; the sky was almost blue; the air was mild, and the Beuvron, no longer swollen, quietly subsided in its bed.

The inmates of La Germonière had risen late and breakfasted together somewhat mournfully. They were all thinking of the sad event of the evening before, and no one could speak of anything else. Nothing had been heard from Dr. Subigny; the young outlaw had not reappeared, and the servants had not found the bodies of the drowned couple, although they had again searched for them along the banks of the river.

This was by no means enlivening, and, to divert the thoughts of the girls, uncle Armand persuaded them to try a long ride on horseback.

Madame Daudierne at first made some objections. The moment seemed to be badly chosen for cantering about the district watered by the stream in which the Vignemals had met their death, but her brother-in-law represented to her that all the lamentations in the world could not bring the deceased to life again; that the young ladies needed exercise; that they were not related to the departed pair; and that, besides, it was not thought improper to ride on horseback even when in mourning.

This last argument made Madame Daudierne smile, and Germaine, taking this smile as an assent, at once hastened to the stables to order the groom to saddle the three horses which the establishment possessed. Germaine was always ready for any kind of gadding about, and if she did not accompany M. Daudierne when he went shooting, it was only because he positively refused to take her.

Laurence displayed less liking for outdoor exercise, but she never opposed Germaine's wishes, still less those expressed by her uncle, and so she now willingly consented to be one of the party. In an hour's time the two sisters, duly attired in riding-habits, set their feet in the stirrups, under their mother's somewhat anxious eyes. She stood at the door watching them, and enjoined upon them to be careful.

Germaine looked charming in her tight-fitting dark blue habit, and a broad-brimmed felt hat, a Gainsborough, which had formerly served as a walking-hat, and which she had altered for the occasion, for she but seldom rode, as Madame Daudierne had not brought up her daughters for "high life," although she allowed them to take riding lessons at a respectable school. She thought of marrying them to honest men of the upper middle classes, to which she belonged herself, and she fully believed that suitable husbands could be found for them without need of prancing about on horseback in the Bois-de-Boulogne.

Laurence, on her side, had assumed a little low-crowned hat which was really her brother's property, although it admirably suited herself. As

for M. Armand Daudierne, he wore the suit which he habitually donned to wander about his sister-in-law's woods; a round cap, a short jacket, velvet breeches, and heavy high boots. He did not believe in making an exhibition of his riding, as is done in the Champs Elysées, but he was none the less a very good horseman, having ridden a great deal when he was a young man, and he looked well in the saddle. Tall, thin, and muscular, with bright eyes, fine teeth, and a scarcely silvered beard, he might, at first sight, have passed for forty at the most.

He rode one of the grey mares which belonged to Madame Daudierne's carriage; two useful animals, which could be used both in saddle and harness, provided they were not galloped too long, as they were used to a somewhat sober pace. The other mare had fallen to Laurence, who liked her easy gait and quiet step, while Germaine was mounted on a pretty chestnut half-bred, which her brother Alfred pretended to have trained himself, and about which he greatly boasted. Anyone who heard him would have imagined that this remarkable horse leaped five-bar fences without stumbling, and followed the hounds all day without breaking down.

M. Daudierne, who had not in the least believed in the exploits related by his nephew, was rather mistrustful of this vaunted hunter, and would have preferred to mount him himself; but the horse was not up to his weight, and Germaine was so anxious to try him, that the old bachelor good-naturedly consented to allow her to do so.

To complete the cavalcade, a groom in livery, at least, was wanting; but at La Germonière no one thought of conforming to Parisian fashions, and Baptiste, the old servant, would have cut a sorry figure in a groom's livery on a farm-horse.

"Don't stay too long, I beg of you," said Madame Daudierne, who felt by no means reassured when she saw her younger daughter amuse herself by making the bay paw the ground.

"Don't be anxious, my dear Reine; we shall be back before dark," replied uncle Armand. "These young ladies are all ardour when they start out, but when they have trotted for an hour or two they will have had quite enough of it."

"We shall see about that," said Germaine in a low tone, and then the party walked their horses down the avenue leading to the main gate, beyond the park which its former owner had walled round. On the opposite side the river limited the secluded domain.

M. Daudierne kept to the left of the party, Germaine to the right, and Laurence rode between her uncle and her sister.

"Where shall we go, young ladies?" asked the leader of the expedition. "It is all very well to ride, but it is necessary to have some understanding. Shall we go as far as Arcy? We might take Dr. Subigny by surprise, and he may have something new to communicate."

"It seems to me that it would be hardly proper for us to be seen in the town to-day," said Laurence.

"Why not?"

"The loss which Monsieur du Pomméval has met with is so recent that we might be accused of being indifferent to it."

"But it is by no means certain that the young man looks upon an accident which makes him the heir to a large fortune as a loss. However, perhaps you are right. Country people gossip about everything, and are quite capable of saying that we were in a hurry to find out whether he was the heir or not. In any case it is better not to give them a chance to talk.

But if we don't go to Arcy, we can only follow the road which skirts the river banks."

"You wouldn't do that, uncle!" cried Germaine. "We might come upon the bodies of those unfortunate people. It would be even worse than meeting Monsieur du Pomméval. For my part I am dreadfully afraid of seeing a drowned person."

"I thought that you were not afraid of anything. But I confess that the prospect of finding ourselves face to face with a dead body is not tempting, and it wouldn't be unlikely to happen, for the river has fallen a great deal since the morning. Well, as that is the case, I return to my first question. Where shall we go? I have no preference, but I don't know of many places about here where we can ride. The district is full of rocks, and there are a number of ravines. All that is very picturesque, but not easy for horses to tread, and if one of ours broke its knees your mother would say it was my fault. I should make up for it by buying another, but as a young ladies' chaperone I should no longer inspire my sister-in-law with confidence."

"Well," said Mademoiselle Germaine, "if you will let me show you where to go we shall have the most charming ride that can be imagined, and I will answer for everything."

"You are a nice one to answer for anything at all!" retorted her uncle. "But, tell me, where do you wish to take us?"

"To the Roche-de-Lémon."

"What may that be?"

"What!" exclaimed Germaine, "have you been all this time at La Germonière without knowing where the Roche-de-Lémon is?"

"Never heard of it, never!" was her uncle's answer. "I know the Bois-du-Tertre, which belongs to your mother, and where there are plenty of snipe, and the forest of La Bretèche, where I have no right to shoot, to my very great regret, but as for your Roche-de-Lémon —"

"Well, then, you must come with me and admire it. Here we are at the end of the avenue. Let us turn to the right. I will tell you the legend—for it has a legend."

"A legend! that's charming; but is it far off, this poetic rock?"

"A mile at the most. The road is delightful. We shall have to cross through the wood so dear to you on account of its snipe; we shall then come to a wild gorge—there is a torrent below, and enormous rocks which hang over on both sides."

"Do you think that overhanging rocks are pretty?" asked uncle Armand, sarcastically.

"Adorable! But that is nothing to the beauties of my rock. Imagine a wall of granite rising above a screen of verdure, a denticulated slab which stands against the sky—the Alps or the Pyrenees in miniature, and when you climb to the top you overlook the whole forest of La Bretèche, and can even see the château belonging to the Duke de Bretteville; it is the finest point of view for ten miles round."

"That château is only a summer-house, and the duke, who is too old to care for shooting, seldom goes there. It seems that he happens to be there now, however. Monsieur du Pomméval told me so the other day. He even wished me to go to see the noble lord to ask his permission to shoot his deer. But that would be rather risky, and I don't care to do it, especially as he has lately lost his only son."

"Yes, in Lunis. The papers speak of the young fellow's death. I

see," said Germaine, "he was killed in making a charge at the head of his squadron. Well, we are going to the rock, are we not, uncle?"

"As there is nowhere else to go, I consent, on condition that you ride carefully."

"I promise. See! Ralph is behaving beautifully! Since we started he hasn't shied or stumbled once. Alfred doesn't know how to ride him, and he will end by making him hard to manage. But I can do as I please with him. However, now is the time to tell you my legend."

"Who told it to you?" asked Laurence.

"Monsieur du Pomméval. Ah! it surprises you, as he generally talks of races and jockeyz. But as he saw that this horse talk tired me, he indulged the other day in more interesting discourse, of which the following is a specimen:—'There is in the middle of the Roche-de-Lémon a crack which divides it from top to bottom. You may have already guessed that this crack is but an airhole of Hades, or something of that sort. Fairies inhabit the interior of the granite palace, and heaven only knows what treasures they hide there—diamonds, emeralds, and rubies by the shovelful. However, no one can enter without their permission, and when they are in a bad humour they let loose some frightful storms upon the district. The wind which blows across their mountain uproots the trees and overthrows the houses——'"

"And drowns the people who take the ferry-boat across the river," interrupted uncle Armand. "But let me tell you, Germaine, that your legend is by no means novel. Fairies like these run all over Brittany."

"Wait! I haven't finished. 'When a young girl wishes to know whom she will marry she goes to the crack in the rock and whispers her own name, Laurence or Germaine, for instance, and she immediately hears a voice as sweet as the music of the heavenly sphere, the voice of the fairy queen, which replies George, or Ernest, or Edmond. And the girl will love the man whom the fairies name, and will be loved by him in return, which is a very important point, for it is not worth while to pledge one's self to an ungrateful lover.'"

"I call that an ingenious invention, upon my word," declared the sceptical old bachelor. "The aspiring suitor has only to hide himself behind the rock, and if he be a ventriloquist he can play his little trick."

"Oh, uncle! you never believe in anything."

"I believe that there are young girls foolish enough to go to consult this oracle, but hope you are not one of them."

"Now, do you know, I wouldn't swear to that," answered Germaine, gaily.

"That's you, all over! But you wouldn't catch your sister going to confide the sorrows of her heart to the Roche-de-Lémon."

"Because she has none."

"Then you admit that you have?" asked uncle Armand, laughing.

"No; but I should like to have. It would occupy my mind," replied Germaine, with saucy frankness.

"Well, if I were a handsome young man, like Arthur du Pomméval, for instance, I know what I should do. I should hide myself near the diabolical telephone and then——"

"You would perhaps lose your time. All names don't suit the fairies. But here we are at the Bois-du-Tertre. Isn't it lovely? Those tall beeches, which rise like columns of grey marble above the yellow autumn foliage, are really grand. Ah! if Victor Hugo had ever seen the Roche-de-Lémon

he would have written some beautiful verses about it, and I should have learned them by heart."

"And you would recite them all day long, I haven't the least doubt of it," said Monsieur Daudierne; "but, just now, you'll oblige me if you will let me listen for a moment, for I think that I can hear some one walking in the wood here near us."

"In the wood?" repeated Germaine: "I did hear a noise like the rustling of leaves. But I don't hear it now. Perhaps we have started a roebuck, and it has run off."

"There are no deer here, unfortunately," rejoined Monsieur Daudierne. "The forest of La Bretèche is full of them, no doubt, but they don't go out. The copse that belongs to your mother doesn't extend as far as it might."

"Perhaps some hare has left its seat and made off."

"I should say that it was a man's footsteps I heard," said M. Daudierne, who was always inclined to be obstinate.

"Some poacher, perhaps," opined Germaine. "Who knows? It may be the outlaw whom Dr. Subigny introduced to us yesterday."

"Why should he hide himself, then? I asked him to go shooting with me."

"He is wrong if he does hide himself, for he is a magnificent fellow. I never saw such eyes. They flash and they burn alike. If he had looked at me as he did at Laurence I might have fallen in love with him."

"There is no danger of that for me," murmured Laurence, who seemed pre-occupied.

"And I, for my part," said uncle Armand, "am very sorry that I made any advances to so rude a fellow. I have been thinking all night about the accident on the Beuvron, and the more I think of it the more suspicious the doctor's favourite appears to me. The fellow asserts that he risked his life to save our unfortunate neighbours, but no one saw him dive, and his word is all there is to prove it. Now, there are some very improbable statements in the story which he told. He says that Madame Vignemal's body was cast up at the bottom of the slope, but it was not to be seen when we got there. There is nothing to prove that the gipsy did not throw it back into the water."

"But that would be a crime," exclaimed Germaine. "Why should he have committed a crime? To make Monsieur du Pomméval heir to our neighbour's fortune? That isn't likely. He doesn't know Monsieur du Pomméval, and so he had no reason to wish him well. Besides," she added, laughing, "he hasn't studied the Civil Code, I presume, and he does not know anything about the—what do you call it?—the 'presumption of survival.'"

"That is very probable," rejoined uncle Armand, "but he had a grudge against Madame Vignemal, who used to set her gamekeepers after him. If I were a magistrate I should begin by sending the man known as Roch Ferrer to prison, and I should leave him there until he told the whole truth as to the ferry-boat catastrophe."

"Handsome Arthur du Pomméval would not agree with you," urged Germaine.

"I cannot believe that this Roch is an assassin," said Laurence, softly. "Your friend, the doctor, would not be so interested in him if he believed him capable of—"

"Hush!" whispered Monsieur Daudierne, abruptly stopping his grey mare. "This time I distinctly heard some one, and I am sure that a

man is walking through the underbrush there, on our left ! Let me look, and do you listen."

The two young girls were silent at once, and the little party halted on the road, which was scarcely wide enough to allow three horses to pass abreast. The plantation bordering the road did not extend far, and it had openings at intervals, in which the grass grew high enough to hide the ground. The grass was of the dry kind in which game hides in the autumn. It waved backwards and forwards, stirred gently by the breeze, but it could scarcely be supposed long enough to hide a man ; and the wood had now become still again.

"You are mistaken, my dear uncle," said Germaine, in a low tone, after waiting for a moment. "We are the only persons here."

"I assert the contrary," retorted Monsieur Daudierne, in an angry tone. "We are being followed, and have been ever since we entered this little road."

"Who can be following us ? Robbers ? That is most unlikely. What motive could any one have for spying upon us ? We are not conspirators."

"I can't guess the motive for this spying any better than you can, but I repeat that we are being very closely tracked, and if the branches were not so close together I would push my way through them. But I have another plan for catching the individual who is watching us, and I will put it in practice presently. Come, let us go on, young ladies."

"I shall be glad to do so," said Germaine. "Ralph is restive, and if we stop every second minute I shall soon be unable to hold him in."

"We will begin to canter further on. Hereabouts the road is too bad. But let me ask you if you are not afraid of leading us astray by taking us to your fairy rock ? You have never been there, I suppose ?"

"No, but Monsieur Subligny described the road one ought to take, and I don't need a guide."

"What !" exclaimed uncle Armand, "has the doctor also been exciting your curiosity about this Roche-de-Lémon ? I did not think that he was of a poetic turn. Well ! as I have been foolish enough to set out on a voyage of discovery, I will go on to the end, that is, after I have settled my account with this prowler who is after us ; for I must find out, first of all, which of us he is following."

"Do you imagine that it can be Laurence or myself ?" asked Germaine. "It must be some lover, then. That would be very amusing ; but among all the young heroes of Arcy, I don't know a single one who is capable of running about the woods for the sole pleasure of beholding us from afar, athwart the thickets. In any case, I'll guarantee that it isn't Monsieur du Pomméval."

"Why do you always ridicule him ?" asked the elder sister.

"To give you a chance to take his part," replied Germaine, laughing. "You have always had a weakness for the handsome Arthur."

"Silence, young ladies, and listen to me," interrupted their uncle, lowering his voice. "You see that cross-road ? There is a wide thoroughfare there which cuts across the road we are following. You must go ahead and keep straight on. In the meantime I intend to alight and pretend that I am tightening my saddle. Then I shall mount again and hide behind that big oak tree at the intersection of the two roads. If the fellow who is following us undertakes to cross the path, I shall see him, and I shall begin a chase which will end by my trapping my game. If, on the contrary, he doesn't show himself, it will be because he isn't following me,

and I shall soon be ahead of him. The mare is sure-footed, and can gallop. You must wait for me at the outskirts of the wood. I will join you there, and as soon as we are out of the wood we will ride off so fast that the rascal will be unable to follow us. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly!" whispered Germaine. "But this man may have evil designs, and if he intends to attack you——"

"I shouldn't need any one to keep him off. I never go out without a good revolver in my pocket. That was a way I had in America. But I'll venture to say that the matter will end in another way. Don't be uneasy about me."

Germaine was about to speak again, but Monsieur Daudierne made her a sign to be silent, and suddenly raising his voice so as to be heard fully twenty paces off, he said: "The deuce! my saddle is turning. That stupid groom has bungled with the girth. I must get off and set the buckles straight. Don't wait, young ladies. I shall catch you up presently over yonder."

The girls somewhat unwillingly made up their minds to obey, but when they had passed the side-path they looked back several times. They soon saw Monsieur Daudierne mount again and take up a position behind a tree, the trunk of which was large enough to hide him.

"What a strange idea our uncle has taken into his head," said Laurence.

"Yes; I don't think it a good one at all," replied Germaine. "If there is really a man hidden in the thicket, he must have guessed the meaning of uncle's device, and he can easily escape him. He has only to turn back."

"Well, we shall be rid of him, then," remarked Laurence.

"So much the worse! I should have liked to see him," retorted the younger sister.

"I shouldn't." This strange pursuit was beginning to alarm me, and I am glad that it has stopped."

"Why? It is almost an adventure, and adventures so seldom occur." and Germaine smiled maliciously as she spoke. "But I don't know what to think of this one, for we are certainly followed. I distinctly heard some steps in the cover, and they were not those of a poacher. A poacher would have kept quiet instead of following us—that is clear enough, and I am almost tempted to believe that we have turned the brain of some handsome shepherd who takes one or the other of us for a nymph or a goddess."

"Always your romantic ideas," said Laurence, pettishly. "You are too foolish for anything."

"And you are too wise for anything!" was Germaine's retort. "I advise you to get married as soon as possible; and since we are talking of marriage, let me ask if you would marry Arthur du Pomméval?"

"I never put the question to myself," replied Laurence.

"But you will be obliged to do so now. Arthur has lately paid you a great deal of attention, and now that he is rich, he won't delay declaring himself."

"I shall wait till he does."

"Of course. But you must already know what you would reply if mamma came to inform you that the heir of the Vignemals had asked for your hand."

"Well, what would you reply, Germaine, if he asked for yours?"

"That," said Germaine, "is a true Norman reply to avoid telling me what you think. Well, you know how to keep your own secrets. On

my side I will be frank with you, and confess that if Monsieur du Pommeval gave me the preference I should hardly know what to say. I have nothing to say against him, and I should never have such a good offer again. But it would be a marriage of reason—nothing more, for I don't love him. It is asserted that such marriages turn out the best, but I don't care to try. Still, I might do so if I were greatly urged. In a word, I have not decided."

"Nor have I."

"Good! But you are the elder. It is for you to be married first. You will see that you will soon be called upon to decide. That is why I advise you to think about it now. Oh, how restive Ralph is getting! See how he is gnawing his bit! My wrists hurt me from holding him in, and I am afraid that he won't wait till my uncle appears at the edge of the wood."

"We are almost there."

"I hope that he will join us soon. If he delays much longer, I can't answer for Ralph. Do you see him?"

"No," said Laurence, after looking back. "He is still behind the oak tree. You ought not to have tried to ride that horse."

"Bah! if I have any trouble with him I can hold him in. Besides, I would rather have followed you on foot than mount that great carriage horse you are riding. Touch him up a little. Try to make him trot, so that I can make Ralph lead."

Laurence touched up her mare, but the quiet animal did not go much faster. The road had become more and more difficult, especially for the horses. Bois-du-Tertre is not open like a State forest, and it lies upon a hillside, the somewhat rapid slope of which is not easily ascended, even by a pedestrian. Beyond extends an open space, but not a level one, for, skirting the Beuvron beyond La Germonière, the country is a succession of steep hills and deep ravines; in fact, a perfect Norman Switzerland, contrasting in the strangest manner with the fertile plains of the low country round about. The Roche-de-Lémon, so highly praised by Germaine, is the culminating point of the chain of heights, which in geographical parlance divides the basin of the Seine from the basin of the Loire.

Mesdemoiselles Daudierne finally reached the outskirts of the wood where uncle Armand had recommended them to wait for him, and they were somewhat surprised to behold a succession of rocks piled up one above another, and extending for a long distance. There was a road of some width fringing the wood; but the one that they had followed led straight across the scattered rocks, which had no doubt been thrown up by some antediluvial outbreak.

Laurence made haste to turn Grise, her mare, who desired nothing better than a more even path to tread. But Ralph, Germaine's steed, as is apt to be the case with a half-bred, was not disposed to obey like a mere hack. He would not keep to the path, but inhaled the air with dilated nostrils, and stealthily endeavoured to run away. Germaine pulled him in as well as she could, but her arms were not strong, and she began to feel tired.

"Sister Anne! sister Anne!" she said, quoting the familiar legend of Blue Beard, "'don't you see any one coming?'" If uncle Armand remains much longer down there, on the watch, Ralph will set off."

"What do you mean by 'set off?'"

"Run off, then, if you like it better. I have a great mind to quiet him by letting him have a good gallop."

"Oh, don't do that!" pleaded Laurence. "We might not be able to follow you. Besides, my uncle is coming, for I hear a stir."

"Yes, in the woods, and Ralph hears it too, and he will rear if I don't let him go."

The noise rapidly approached, and it was not that of a horse's hoof. It came from the thicket. The branches crackled and broke as though a wild boar had been trying to find an outlet between the trees. The bay reared and swung to the right, and Germaine, thinking it time to give him his head if she did not want to be thrown, allowed him to start off at full speed. This was done so quickly that Laurence did not see which way her young sister had taken.

At the same moment a man darted from the wood and leaped upon the road. He appeared so suddenly and made such a noise that even Grise, the peaceful old mare Grise, started in surprise. Laurence kept her seat, however, although she was not a good rider, but she was so terrified that she closed her eyes. When she opened them again a man was standing before her holding the mare by the rein, near the bit, and she immediately recognised him. Roch Ferrer, whom she had seen but for a moment the night before, was not easily forgotten. And the new-comer was Roch Ferrer, bareheaded, with his hair blown back by the wind, his lips parted, and his burning eyes gazing at Laurence, who was not at all sure but what the gipsy had some evil design.

"Let go of my horse's bridle," she said, as calmly as she could.

Roch released his hold, in due obedience to her order, but he did not draw back a single step.

"You have been following us ever since we entered the wood," said Laurence. "Why have you done so?"

"It is you whom I have been following, and I have followed you to look at you. I always follow you whenever you go out."

"If I had known it before——"

"You would have forbidden my doing so. I know that. And for that very reason, I hid myself."

"But I forbid you now, and I warn you that in another minute my uncle, Monsieur Daudierne, will be here."

"I have just escaped from him, and I shall escape from him again," retorted Roch. "But before I fly I must speak to you."

Laurence started. She was alone with the young outlaw, whose excited eyes forboded nothing good. Uncle Armand did not appear, and the information which Dr. Subligny had given her was not calculated to tranquilise her, when she thought of the life the young man led. Whether he had risked his life to save the Vignemals or not, Roch was none the less a wanderer without a home, at variance with social law, and knowing no rule but his own passions. It was not the time for Laurence to lose her self-possession, and she mustered up courage enough to reply, coldly: "If you wish to speak to me, why don't you come to La Germonière?"

"Because I cannot speak freely to you at La Germonière. Your mother, your sister, or your uncle would be there."

"What have you to tell me, then, that they should not hear?" asked Laurence with sudden haughtiness.

"I wish to tell you that I love you," boldly replied the gipsy.

This daring declaration brought a crimson flush to the cheeks of

Mademoiselle Daudierne, and a burst of anger at once overcame her fear. It seemed to her monstrous and ridiculous that this vagabond should speak to her in such a manner, but her womanly instincts told her that there was no immediate danger threatening her, as she merely had to deal with a sentimental outlaw.

"You love me! you!" exclaimed she, darting a contemptuous look at Roch.

"Like a madman," he replied, without lowering his eyes.

"You must, indeed, be a madman to dare to speak like this to me," said Laurence, proudly. "What is there in common between you and me, I should like to know? What right have you to insult me? You will repent it, I warn you."

"No," answered Roch Ferrer, shaking his head, "I was forced to love you whether I would or not, and I only ask you to hear me. When you have listened to me to the end, you shall see me no more—that is, if you forbid me to appear before you. But I must tell you all. For three years I have been trying to speak to you alone."

"Three years!" exclaimed Laurence, in unfeigned amazement. "What foolish joke is this? I saw you yesterday for the first time."

"I see you every day."

"Even when I am in Paris?" asked Laurence, in a mocking tone.

"No. When you are in Paris I don't exist. But I live through you and for you. If you did not spend the summer at La Germonière, I should have left the district long ago."

"I am greatly obliged to you for having remained here," answered Laurence, with a scornful smile, "but I shall be still more obliged if you will tell me what you wish to accomplish by persecuting me in this way."

"Nothing."

"What do you wish with me, then?"

"I wish to obey you as a dog obeys its master."

"I don't desire your obedience, and I see that you are more crazy than I had imagined. Enough of this, if you please, and let me go to meet my uncle, who, as I told you before, is not far off."

"He will not find me here, for I have nothing more to say. You now know that you can dispose of me as a slave. Whatever you may command me to do, I will do it, no matter what it may be."

"I have nothing to ask of you," replied Laurence, sarcastically. "I do not desire aught which you could offer."

"If you wished for my death, you would find me ready to die. My life belongs to you. I exposed it yesterday to spare you a sorrow."

"What do you say?"

"I detested those Vignemals, but I knew that if they crossed the river it was to visit La Germonière. If I had not thought that their death would give you pain, I should not have tried to save them."

This time, although Mademoiselle Daudierne was once more mistress of herself, she did not immediately find a reply. Roch Ferrer's strange assertion surprised her very much, and somewhat touched her feelings also.

"You would have done better," she said at last, "if you had prevented them from getting into the boat, as you were there when they started."

"That is true," answered Roch, "I thought of you too late."

This reply startled the young girl, and gave another direction to her

thoughts. The accident on the Beuvron appeared to her in another light, and so also did Roch Ferrer. But she did not take time to reflect upon what she had just been told. Her uncle was coming at a fast trot up the road which she had already followed with her sister. She could not see him, for she had turned to the left on leaving the wood, but she could hear the sound of a horse's hoofs striking the pebbly soil.

"Go," she said hastily to Roch Ferrer. "I would not have Monsieur Daudierne find you here."

"I will go," replied the gipsy, who had not ceased devouring her with his eyes; "I will go, but I shall return whenever you summon me. Whenever you have an order to give me, place a light at your window and come to the Beuvron heights, walk to the end of the tamarisk hedge——"

"How do you know which is my window?" asked Laurence, without seeming to notice that Roch was making an appointment with her.

"I saw you at it for the first time three years ago," said Roch, "and since that day I have passed many a long night in watching it."

The sound of hoofs came nearer. In another minute uncle Armand would emerge from the narrow pathway which divided the Bois-du-Tertre into two equal parts. Roch caught hold of one of the young girl's hands—the one in which she held her whip—and covered it with kisses before she had time to think of freeing it from his grasp, and then, at a single bound, he leaped over the embankment skirting the wood, and disappeared in the thicket.

It was high time he did so, for Monsieur Daudierne now came up, spurring his grey mare (which was blown by the rapid ascent), and calling out at the pitch of his voice: "The scamp has escaped me! He saw that I was watching him at the turn of the road, and has gone across the wood to throw me off his track. Well, let him go and get hanged! I shan't follow him. It is enough to have prevented him from keeping after us. But I must tell our servants to beat the woods. Your mother ought not to allow suspicious unknown men to prowl about the woods so near her house. They might get into the park at night. But what is the matter? You look quite pale."

Laurence was undoubtedly about to relate the adventure she had just met with, but Monsieur Daudierne added: "Where is Germaine? What has become of her?"

It was quite natural that she should reply to this question at once, and so she was able to avoid explaining the true cause of her pallor. "Germaine was carried away by her horse," she said. "The good-for-nothing animal galloped off: he got tired of waiting, and she could not hold him in."

"The deuce he did! Your sister rides fairly well and is not timid, but how do we know where Ralph has taken her? I am surprised that you should have stayed quietly here while Germaine was really in danger."

"My mare can't keep up with Ralph."

"Nor mine, unfortunately, and I ought to have known what would happen. But if we can't gallop we can canter, and we shall end by finding the madcap who imagines that she can manage a half-bred as easily as a cart-horse. I hope that she has kept her seat, and that Ralph has quieted down a short distance off. The question is, which way did he go?"

"He made off so quickly, and I was so frightened, that I did not see where he went," replied Laurence, with an effort. "It seems to me, however, that he darted along this path on the right."

"Then he certainly did not go into the wood. In fact I should have met him," remarked uncle Armand. "It seems to me impossible that he can have gone along the rocky path which runs up the steep slope above us. I think, after all, that we had better follow the main road which skirts the Bois-du-Tertre. Your sister has already tried it, and I think that she will have good sense enough to return to La Germonière by the rise which extends to the park gate. She won't see her 'Roche-de-Lémon' to-day. That will be her punishment! But if your mother knew what has happened she would be dreadfully frightened, and I must take Germaine back to her. Come, Laurence, whip up Grise, and let us be off after your sister. This delightful ride has been entirely devoted to pursuing people, but I would rather ride after my niece than after that rascal, who has got the better of me, for I hope that we shall overtake her, and then I can scold her to my heart's content."

Uncle Armand deceived himself. He was not destined to succeed in anything he undertook that day. While he was hastening with Laurence along the only easy road which he could find, Germaine was being borne along, against her will, over obstacles that would have stayed the most daring fox-hunter in England. At the moment when she lost control of Ralph she was aware that, of all things, she must succeed in keeping him from an open, unobstructed road.

She knew the path which, by sudden abrupt turnings, ran down to the banks of the river. She also understood the ill-trained beast which her reckless brother had bought for the vain-glory of risking his neck on its back before the dandies of Arcy. She knew that it leaped fences to perfection, that it possessed both speed and wind, that it was difficult to hold in, and inclined to run off at all times. It had more than once already nearly broken Alfred Daudierne's neck. He had related his mishaps to Germaine alone, and she had been cunning enough to keep them to herself, for she was dying to ride the dangerous animal. She had even told her mother and her uncle that Ralph was a perfect lamb, and had thus accomplished her purpose.

The horse, held by the nervous hand of this girl of twenty, had not succeeded in turning to the right, but had darted along a cross-road, or rather she had made him take it, and in this direction the ascent was so steep that he could not but quiet down a little. It was only necessary for the imprudent Germaine to avoid being thrown, and she hoped to succeed in this. Everything went well at the beginning of the gallop. Ralph went fast, but it was evident that he could not long keep up such a pace. However much a horse may try to "put off," its wind will give out if it is obliged to climb a steep ascent.

Unfortunately, this hillside was but the first step of a kind of natural staircase in the rock. The entire region seemed to have been formerly convulsed by volcanic eruptions. On the verge of the Bois-du-Tertre there began a series of steps, piled one upon another, and intersected at certain places by deep depressions in the soil.

When Ralph had run up the first step, Germaine saw a perfect abyss below her. The road led down to another hill in front; the slope formed an angle of forty-five degrees, and the bewitched bay, after taking breath, darted blindly on. Then alone did Germaine understand the danger she was exposed to. Her life depended upon Ralph's keeping his footing. If he slipped on one of the round stones across the path, the young girl would be dragged from her saddle, and her brains might be dashed out against a rock.

She instinctively shut her eyes, for she had not been able to avoid a first feeling of fright; but she did not loosen her hold of the reins, and did not lose courage, although many more skilful riders would have done so. Germaine, however, had *heart*, in every meaning of the word. Although she was gay and somewhat giddy, as usual at her age, she was also affectionate, compassionate, and "full of feeling"—to quote a phrase so frequently used in the days of the French Directory; and she was even capable of displaying more serious qualities, which no one knew of, not even herself. There was a masculine side to her joyous, tender nature. Although she had remained childish in disposition, this was because no occasion had presented itself for her to show her force of character. Such an "occasion" for a young girl usually comes with love, and this feeling she knew nothing of, except what she had heard about it from others. She had no clear idea of the tender passion, having been brought up by a mother who had all the staid ways of respectable people who do not understand the use of preventive education. She had never been warned of the dangers to which a woman's life is open, and had been allowed to believe that marriage was a platonic association of everything advantageous and proper; a port in which it was necessary to anchor, as every one did so.

In such a system as this, the passions of a young heart are never taken into consideration. It is understood that a properly-behaved young girl, of good family, ought never to dream of any but those who are able to marry, and that she must never allow herself to misplace her affections. Germaine had kept hers unawakened, and did not rebel against the ideas inculcated in her mind from childhood. The future, which she heard speak of, seemed to her bearable enough, and she had resigned herself to the idea of marrying "suitably," although she was in no hurry to do so.

The life which she led did not seem irksome to her. Her mother left her free to do as she pleased, and she merely took advantage of her freedom to indulge in the most innocent pleasures; she adored dancing, music, dress, and society, to say everything in one word; and it might be thought that she adored naught besides. Still her sentimental aspirations found expression in words. She often indulged in utterances which had the suddenness of fireworks, and greatly amused her uncle Armand. She said: "I should like to be in love," just as she would have said: "I should like to see the Niagara Falls." And a moment afterwards she thought no more about it.

But active exercise took up a great deal of her time. She was only happy when she was at La Germonière, where she could tire herself out with running about the park, while her sister was drawing under her mother's eyes. The days when she rode out on horseback were her holidays. She had for three months been plotting to ride Ralph, and she did not yet regret the imprudence she had committed. She would not call out, and she would not be afraid.

The peril was none the less momentous, and exceptional courage was necessary to face it without blanching. Ralph had again begun his mad descent, and was going at full speed down a road which skirted an extremely precipitous ravine. It was a miracle that he did not roll down the precipice, for the pathway was covered with smooth pebble stones. A slip, and all would be over. But Germaine had already grown calm again, and only thought of keeping him up and guiding the reins.

With her body thrown back, both hands grasping the reins, she

remained firm in the saddle, and began to hope that she should pass unscathed through this danger. The slope was traversed indeed without a fall, but Ralph did not lessen his pace. The effort he made to ascend the hill had excited, instead of calming him.

Where and when would he stop? It was impossible to tell, and Germaine recommended herself to the Providence which stays the storm as well as lets loose the winds of heaven. It did not trouble her to feel herself borne along to an unknown destination. There was a novelty about the sensation which was not without its charm. She forgot the danger which she incurred, and her imagination flew to the land of dreams. She fancied that she was crossing a dark forest, and would suddenly come upon some mysterious château, the doors of which would open at sight of her, some castle inhabited by the Prince Charming of fairy tales. It seemed to her that she had never lived until now, and an unknown horizon opened before her. As the wind lashed her cheeks, it awakened the dreams which slumbered in her young heart's depths. She now understood the poetry of danger, and pitied her sister Laurence, who was satisfied with riding a quiet horse. Motion seemed to intoxicate her. She almost wished that the reckless ride would never end, and she longed to whip up Ralph to make him go on still faster, even though he fell, and the fall crushed her.

A fatal end was only too greatly to be feared, for there seemed to be no reason why the detestable beast should stop, and if at some turn of the road he suddenly came upon a precipice, he was galloping at such a pace that he could but go over its edge.

Germaine, however, was in the clouds; she did not even think of admiring the wild and grand scenery around her. She heard the noise of the river in the ravine below, but no longer saw it. It had disappeared amid a wild growth of thorny bushes. Beyond were some enormous blocks of granite, which seemed to have been piled up, one upon another, by a Titanic hand, and tall pines, bent by the winds, stood out against the grey sky in the background. On the right, on the left, before and behind, the view was shut in by lofty rocks. It seemed as though the gorge had no issue, as though the world ended there. And when, after going at a wild gallop across a last summit, Germaine came out upon a smooth upland, she asked herself for a moment whether all this were not a dream.

There was no longer any stone wall on her left, or any upon her right. Before her stretched an open space covered with furze and extending to an isolated rock which rose some three hundred yards above the crest upon which she now found herself. All that was necessary was to direct Ralph towards this insurmountable obstacle, and this was not difficult, for a horse that is running away always goes straight ahead.

The animal was now beginning to weaken. He had taken a run that would have tired an Arabian courser, and Germaine could without danger slacken the reins. To add to this happy chance the upland rose in a gentle slope, topped by this strange rock placed athwart it like a goal.

Ralph still ran on; but when he reached the height he was panting, and after a final effort he stopped short. Germaine did not hesitate to alight, and she had the presence of mind to hold on to the reins lest the bay should try to escape. The precaution was needless, however, for he was not in a fit condition to abuse his freedom. He was exhausted and trembling in every limb. It seemed as though he repented of his folly, and he looked sadly at the young girl as if asking for her forgiveness.

Germaine might have whipped him with impunity, but she was too glad to have escaped alive from her peril to think of administering the chastisement that her horse deserved. She said to herself that the fault was all her own. She ought to have foreseen that Ralph, never having been mounted by a lady rider, would try to bolt if he had none but quiet steeds beside him. Germaine now—and kindly, for her heart was kind—gathered a handful of ferns and began to rub him down as skilfully and as carefully as an ostler could have done, and when she had finished she spoke to him: “Do you know, you wicked creature, that you nearly broke my neck?” she said, caressing him with her delicate hand. “I will tell your master how you have behaved, and he will punish you.”

The horse replied by a grateful neighing which made her smile. “And now,” said she, “how are we to get back home, you crazy fellow? I shan’t be such a fool as to mount you again. I have no confidence in you whatever. I have a great mind to leave you here in this lonely spot. The wolves will eat you, and you deserve it. Come here! I am first of all going to tie you to a post because you are a bad, restive horse.”

Ralph undoubtedly understood these little remarks, for he allowed himself to be quietly led by the bridle, which Germaine secured to the trunk of a wild broom.

“Now,” said she, “it remains to be seen what I am to do. I have no wish to remain here, and I don’t like to desert Ralph. My good brother would make a pretty fuss if I lost his half-bred. I must lead my steed by the bridle to La Germonière. It won’t be amusing. I have no certainty of finding my way, for I forgot Little Tom Thumb’s precaution of dropping pebbles along the road, and I was so busy with trying to avoid being pitched head foremost over the rocks that I forgot to look where I was going. I don’t know where I am in the least.”

She began to look about her, and soon saw that the ravine along which she had passed was not so far from the huge rock which crowned the upland. This ravine turned almost in a right angle, extending far beyond the last height she had scaled.

“It is impossible to pass that way,” thought Germaine, and her charming face wore an anxious look, but it soon brightened again.

“I was wrong to torment myself,” she resumed. “Laurence saw Ralph start off. She will tell my uncle of the mishap, and they must be looking for me. I shall get off with a lecture. But heaven knows when they will arrive! The two mares will never be able to do more than walk over these villanous roads. I shall have ample time to contemplate the landscape. It is worth my while to do so, upon my word! I never saw anything to equal it. That grey rock which darts upward is like a stronghold. There is everything there—towers, battlements, everything—even a long fissure from top to bottom. If it were— Why, yes, this is the fairies’ air-hole! Ralph has led me to the right spot. He has brought me straight to the Roche-de-Lémon, and it is just what I thought it would be like.”

This was all that was needed to change the current of her thoughts. She was seized with a wild desire to finish her perilous excursion by climbing and verifying the legend believed throughout the country.

Everything urged her to attempt this. The ascent of the famous rock, perched on a declivity, was not so difficult, and Ralph humbly hung his head, and only asked to be allowed to rest. Not a sound was heard, and this was a proof that nobody had that day come to consult the oracle.

"I will carry out my pilgrimage to the end," said Germaine to herself. "My uncle would try to stop me if I wait for him on this moor. He will be angry when he sees me up there, but I shall tell him that I merely went to see if he were coming. And if I say that it will be only half a fib, for once upon that observatory I'm quite sure that I shall see him afar off, cantering along beside Laurence. At all events I shall climb up."

And without further reflection, Mademoiselle Daudierne, gathering up the skirt of her riding-habit in one hand, set boldly forth to storm the fairy palace of the sprites, who find husbands for such young girls as are bold enough to come and question them. It was but a quarter of an hour's work. She was as agile as an antelope, and the thorns did not scare her away. She caught her skirts in them, and hurt her fingers by catching at prickly broom, but she only laughed at that, and her perseverance was rewarded, for scarcely had she reached the base of the enchanted rock than she beheld a marvellous panorama. At her feet an immense forest of ancient trees stretched into the far distance, and above the branches rose the pointed turrets of a château. Her dream was realised—the dream which had passed through her mind while Ralph was bearing her onward.

"It is the forest of La Bretèche and the castle of the Duke de Bretteville," she said to herself in a whisper. "I did not think it was so near by. Our park would make but a poor appearance beside these lordly old trees. If this forest were mine, I would walk about it day and night. But it isn't mine, and the old duke will never think of asking me to be his wife. Bah! so much the better, for I wouldn't take him even for his forest. I want to have a young husband, either rich or poor, and I don't care which, so long as he suits me; but I shouldn't be sorry to know what his name will be—that is if the fairies will condescend to tell it to me. I do not think that they will, but I don't run any risk in asking them. However," she added, "they might take it into their heads to answer 'Arthur!' and then I should be nicely caught, for I don't in the least wish to marry handsome Arthur du Pomméval."

Germaine interrupted her soliloquy to look for her uncle and sister. But on turning towards the upland where she had left Ralph, she perceived that the nearest height was lofty enough to hide the road which she had followed in her mad course. On this side the horizon was most limited, and she was obliged to renounce the hope of perceiving the two grey mares.

This was annoying, and Mademoiselle Daudierne became perplexed. She began to be anxious as to the situation which she had brought about by her own giddiness. She had never before found herself alone, far from any dwelling, and away from human help; and this beginning of an adventurous life for which she had longed so ardently somewhat troubled her. The silence weighed upon her mind. She would have been glad to hear a bird sing, but the birds did not sing in this solitude.

"They are afraid of waking the fairies," said Germaine to herself. "Well, I shall be bolder than they are, for I don't wish to have come here for nothing, but I won't stay here long. Night might overtake me, and I should never see La Germonière again. It is growing late already."

It was not growing late, but the sky was growing cloudy, and a mist was rising from the damp valley. "Really, now, one might think this was Scotland," murmured Germaine; "a grey horizon, rocks and furze-bushes. The witches of Macbeth would like this spot."

The cleft in the rock was now at hand; Germaine had but a step to take

to touch it, and she hesitated. By dint of thinking of the legend, she half believed in it. The appearance of the singular fissure was calculated, in fact, to fill a young girl's mind with superstitious fear. The rock seemed to have been split from top to bottom with a gigantic sword, and the opening was wide enough for a man to pass through it, but the depths were not visible, and only a little imagination was required to fancy that the passage led into a cave inhabited by supernatural beings.

Germaine was ashamed of her fears, however, and drew near the opening. She felt no little surprise at finding various dry bouquets of flowers, faded ribbons, rings of gilt brass, and little wooden crosses laid upon an inner ledge of the rock. It was evident that all these relics had been left there by some simple-minded consultants of the oracle—peasant girls who had hoped to win the protection of the fairies, or had desired to thank them for having favoured their wishes. The oracle found many believers to visit it, and it might be concluded that it had not deceived the girls who had put faith in its veracity.

Faith was certainly lacking in Mademoiselle Daudierne, but curiosity supplied its place, and for nothing in the world would she have failed to utter her Christian name and confide it to the subterranean echo. So she thrust her head into the fissure and called out very distinctly: "Germaine!" A puff of air blew into her face, and made her draw back. She wondered whence the cold wind came, and she was already laughing at the wild notion which had led her to speak to the rocks, when a deep voice called out: "Roger!"

This unforeseen reply put an end to her laughter, and frightened her even more than it astonished her.

There was nothing infernal about the voice; it was pleasant and very manly, and Germaine was neither timid nor foolish enough to believe for a single instant that a supernatural being had answered her. It was evident that a man was there, in flesh and blood—a man who had amused himself by answering the appeal thus imprudently made by an aspirant to a speedy betrothal. And this joke of rather doubtful taste by no means reassured Germaine as to the intentions of the false prophet. She at first thought of running away, but she had no time to avoid a meeting. The stranger who had just replied suddenly made his appearance, and there was nothing frightful about him.

He was a tall and well-proportioned young man, very well attired, although he did not at all look like a fashion plate "for tailors' use." He wore a shooting suit, but carried no gun with him; and as soon as he caught sight of Germaine, he removed his hat and bowed politely.

She then saw that he had short hair, a long, light, and silky moustache, a sunburnt complexion, and a scar upon his brow—a scar which failed, however, to disfigure a sympathetic and soldierly face. It was evident that he had not expected to see a young girl dressed in a riding-habit at the Roche-de-Lémon, for he seemed to be as much surprised as Germaine. But his embarrassment was not awkwardness.

"Excuse me, mademoiselle, for having frightened you, he said. "I was there on the other side of the rock when you spoke just now, and I could not resist the temptation of replying. I thought that I should see some credulous peasant girl, and I amused myself by playing the sorcerer. I was greatly mistaken it seems, and I beg you to forgive my unintentional error."

All this was said in the tone of a well-bred man, and with a frankness which quieted Germaine's fears.

"I was afraid, I confess it," she said, "but I should have no right to blame you, for I yielded to a foolish fancy in consulting the oracle, and I fully deserved that it should mock me. It is all the fault of the legend."

"Since you know it, mademoiselle, I need not enter into explanations which would make you smile. It suffices for me to know that you won't accuse me of premeditating a scene for any motives of my own. When I left Bretteville I could not possibly guess that I should meet you here."

"Do you live at Bretteville?" asked Germaine, promptly, though why she could not tell.

"I have only been there for a few days, mademoiselle, and I am but a visitor."

"The duke is related to you, perhaps?"

"No, mademoiselle; I was the comrade and friend of his son, who was killed at my side, in Tunis."

"You are an officer, then, sir?"

"Scarcely; for although I was made a sub-lieutenant three months ago, it seems to me as though I were still a quartermaster. You might have found that out just now, mademoiselle; and really, in honour of my new epaulets, I ought not to have indulged in a joke which was only suited to the barracks. Will you excuse me now if I venture to ask you to what happy chance I owe the pleasure of introducing myself, after such an unexpected meeting?"

Germaine saw that it was time to state who she was, and to explain her presence at the Roche-de-Lémon, if she did not wish to be mistaken for a person of another sort. "I live near here, at La Germonière," she said.

"The estate that was sold ten years ago to Madame Daudierne?" asked the stranger.

"Why! how did you know that?" retorted Germaine, in great surprise.

"I was born in this part of the country, mademoiselle. It is true that I left it when I was very young, and that I have not been here for a long time. But I was still here when La Germonière was bought by——"

"My mother, sir. We have been there since the beginning of the summer, but I never came to this spot before. We, that is, my uncle, my sister, and I—started out to find this rock to-day. Unfortunately, Ralph ran away with me and brought me to the foot of this height, where he had to stop at last."

"And over what roads, good heavens!" exclaimed the stranger. "There is scarcely a foothold for a goat along here. How is it that your horse did not fall with you down the precipice past which you rode?"

"He did not slip, for here I am!" replied Germaine, smiling. "I have tied him to a tree on the upland, and he has not done himself any harm; but the run has exhausted him, and I am afraid that he will hardly be able to take me home. I had made up my mind to wait here for my uncle and sister, who are looking for me, no doubt, and will soon join me."

Germaine spoke these last words with emphasis. She especially wished that it should be understood that she had not left home alone, and that she expected some one to come to her assistance.

"I shall not take the liberty, mademoiselle, of dissuading you from awaiting them," said the young fellow, who fully understood the drift of her remarks. "But I am afraid that you will have to wait for a long time. Your uncle will certainly not brave the dangers to which you have been exposed."

"Oh, I did not dream of them," said Germaine, laughing. "It was Ralph who rushed into danger. He is a good horse, and is not afraid of anything."

"There is a safer but much longer road to the Roche-de-Lémon. Your uncle will no doubt come by that one," resumed the stranger.

"I do not think that he knows of it."

"However that may be, mademoiselle, I assure you that you imperilled your life by taking the road you followed. And I must add that it is most imprudent to remain here. I see unfailing signs that the weather is about to change. Night falls very early at this season, and if you were away from home in one of the storms which the peasants pretend are let loose from the caverns of this rock, you would find it very difficult to get back to La Germonière."

"Such being the case, what must I do, then?" asked Germaine, who was somewhat alarmed.

She felt that the unknown gentleman was telling the truth; so she raised her eyes and looked at his face, which bore an expression of frankness. He guessed her thoughts and gently responded. "You would do wrong to mistrust me, mademoiselle. I am only thinking of how I can help you in a trying position, and I will merely take the liberty of telling you what road you ought to follow to reach home without any accident, that is, if you think that you would not lose your way; but this road is crossed in several places, and you might perhaps make a mistake. I will, therefore, offer myself as a guide, and I promise to leave you as soon as you can proceed without me."

"I thank you, sir," stammered Germaine, feeling grateful but perplexed, "but I really cannot leave my horse here."

"Of course not, and I hope that he will be able to carry you back to La Germonière. The road skirting the Bretteville wood is excellent, and if you will follow my advice, you will walk your horse. I will go with you on foot, and, if necessary, help you to manage Ralph."

"How did you know my horse's name?"

"You mentioned it just now when you said that he was a good horse," said the young man, pointing to the untiring bay, who was snorting and pawing the ground, evidently anxious to start off again.

"Oh, he is a fine fellow," replied Germaine, "and I am very glad that he has not foundered. I should not like to have him run off with me again, however," she added, laughing.

"I shall be at hand to prevent that, and I will begin by bringing him here," said the young man, darting down the slope below which Ralph was tied up. He was already some distance off before Mademoiselle Daudierne thought of making any objections to the arrangement which he had just proposed. She remained alone at the base of the enchanted rock, somewhat embarrassed and anxious as to the turn which her adventure had taken, for it proved more romantic than she could have anticipated. However, she was very glad to have help at hand, for the sky was growing cloudy and the day was waning fast.

"After all," she thought, "it is no fault of mine if I return with an escort I have found by chance. My uncle and sister have evidently lost track of me. I cannot really carry formality so far as to pass the night in this place; and, besides, this man is evidently a gentleman by birth and breeding. The guest of the Duke de Bretteville must belong to good society. I shall introduce him to my mother when we reach home, and

that will be the end of it. My uncle will perhaps be under obligations to me for doing so, for I shall have furnished him with a pretext for presenting himself at the château, and the old duke will invite him to shoot over his preserves."

Germaine did not acknowledge to herself the lively impression which the young officer had made upon her, but it had a good deal to do with her resolve. The stranger now appeared leading Ralph by the bridle. The horse had willingly followed him. The instinct of horses is unerring as to those who like them.

"Now that I have looked him over," said the young fellow, "I can answer for his not giving out on the road or running away again. His legs are all right, and the run has quieted him down. He is quite up to all that you require of him to-day. I think, however, that he will need care and rest to-morrow."

"Oh, I will see that he has both," replied Mademoiselle Daudierne. "He belongs to my brother, but I was as fond of him as though he had been mine, and I am still fonder of him now that he has got me through my difficulties."

Germaine had been on the point of saying that she was grateful to Ralph for having brought her to the Roche-de-Lémon, and but narrowly escaped this slip of the tongue.

The young man perhaps understood her, but he did not show that he did, for he resumed with soldierly frankness: "Since you consent, mademoiselle, to let me guide you, I must ask you to go on foot down the slope which leads to the main road. It would be imprudent to try it on horseback. I will lead Ralph all the way down."

He did as he said, acting as though everything had fully been agreed upon, although Germaine had not said anything on the point. However, he believed her to be willing to proceed as he had suggested, and he was right.

"You will think me very curious," she said presently, with a bashful air, "but I should like to know how it was that you heard my name—I spoke so low."

"Oh, very easily, mademoiselle! The hollow in which you uttered that charming name is not very deep, but it is crossed by a cleft which extends to one of the other faces of the rock. I was leaning against that face near this very cleft. You could not see me, and I did not see you, and so I abused the situation by answering you just as some country jack would have replied if he had been watching his sweetheart. I must now introduce myself in a more suitable manner. My name is Roger Pontac, and I am a sub-lieutenant in the Ninth Hussars."

"Roger Pontac!" exclaimed Germaine.

"Yes, mademoiselle," replied the young officer, somewhat surprised by Germaine's manner. "But my name, of course, does not interest you or remind you of any one, as you never heard of me."

"But it seems to me that I have, and recently, too," replied Mademoiselle Daudierne.

"I am very glad that I am not wholly unknown to you; but I doubt whether any one about here remembers me, and if I mentioned my name it was only because custom required that I should do so. I ought to have begun by that; but as you are not an Englishwoman, I hope you will excuse the oversight."

"I excuse you all the more readily as you really began by your telling

name, or half of it," replied the young girl, laughing. "Before I saw you I already knew that your name was Roger. At the foot of the Roche-de-Lémon that is all I had a right to ask to know."

"You remind me that I was very forward, mademoiselle, and I am afraid that you will never respect me now," observed the stranger.

"Oh, I don't blame you at all, and to prove it, I am going to let you take care of me until I reach home."

"This road will take you there, mademoiselle, and you can already see that it is not like the frightful paths along which you passed in coming here."

Ralph, led by Lieutenant Pontac, had just stepped out upon a well-kept road which Mademoiselle Daudierne had not seen when gazing at the horizon from the height on which the fairies' rock was perched. This road, kept in order at the expense of the town of Arcy, skirted the Bretèche woods, and after a full sweep returned to the verge of the Bois-du-Tertre. Those who had cut it had evidently intended to avoid making a bridge across the ravine, along which Germaine had ridden in mortal peril.

As the crow flies, La Germonière was not far from the Roche-de-Lémon, but it took an hour to reach it by this road.

"We have no time to lose, for it is growing very cloudy," said the young officer. "Allow me to help you into your saddle, mademoiselle."

Mademoiselle Daudierne had gone too far to refuse, and so she placed her little foot, without demur, in the hand which M. Roger Pontac offered her as a stirrup. Ralph raised his head and drew himself up as he felt the reins, but he did not attempt to renew the tricks which had so nearly cost Germaine her life. It seemed as though the intelligent animal wished to tell her that he was able to carry her, and would behave himself as he ought.

"Really, sir," said Germaine, "I am very sorry to give you so much trouble. My horse takes very long steps, and I am afraid that it will tire you very much to follow him."

"Oh, don't fear that, mademoiselle ! I have always served in a cavalry regiment, but my boyhood was spent in rambling among our woods and mountains, and I would willingly walk ten miles to have the pleasure of escorting you."

"I remember," said Germaine, without noticing this unmistakable compliment, "that you said you belonged to this part of the country. We pass the summer in this province. You are from Arcy, of course ?"

"No, mademoiselle. I was born on a farm which belongs to the Duc de Bretteville, a farm which my father managed. I was twelve years old when I was sent to school in Paris."

Germaine had not expected to hear her escort say that he was a farmer's son, for he looked like the son of a gentleman. But the discovery did not worry her. She would almost have regretted it had he been noble. Why was this ? She did not yet know. She was perhaps thinking that her mother and her uncle would willingly receive a well-bred young man, who had won his epaulets by his own merit, while they would have felt themselves obliged to be very reserved with a representative of the privileged class of society. Indeed Madame Daudierne preferred to receive the class to which she belonged, and uncle Armand, on his side, did not fancy country squires. If he received M. du Pomméval, it was because the handsome Arthur was really only a cit. whose father had assumed the name of his estate.

"You see, mademoiselle, that Ralph cannot distance me," resumed Lieutenant Pontac in a lively tone. "See what it is to have learned in one's youth how to use one's legs! I should, of course, prefer to be riding beside you, but I am very glad to be a good pedestrian, since you allow me to serve you as a guide."

"And I, sir," said Germaine, politely, "am in hopes that we shall have the pleasure of seeing you at La Germonière. We are neighbours, as you reside at the Château de Bretteville, and my mother will be anxious to thank you."

"Oh! mademoiselle, it is I who ought to thank you for trusting yourself to me."

"You will come, will you not?" said the young girl, surprised by this evasive reply.

"I dare not promise," replied Roger Pontac, who was evidently embarrassed.

"Why not?"

"Because I must return to my regiment, which is in Tunis. I have only a month's leave, and I have but little time left me," was the reply.

"You have a few days, have you not?" urged Germaine, with unexpected forwardness.

"I did not, however, think of visiting at all," resumed Roger Pontac. "I have been away for ten years now, and no one remembers me about here, though if I showed myself many people would perhaps recognise me. It would then be known that I was at the Château de Bretteville, and I should be blamed for not visiting."

"Are you so anxious as all that not to displease the inhabitants of Arcy?" asked Germaine, smiling.

"Their opinion is almost a matter of indifference to me," was the reply, "but I have relations—not in the town, it is true—relations whom I don't wish to see, or yet to offend. It is for that reason that I am here *incognito*, and I can only continue so by remaining at the Duke's residence. His servants came from Paris with him, and they don't know that I belong to this part of France."

"Ours came from Paris, too, and I don't suppose that the people about here keep a watch upon the folks who visit La Germonière."

"Certainly not. But the relatives whom I alluded to are your neighbours."

"Indeed!"

"And near ones too. Le Fougeray is but a short distance from your mother's place."

"Le Fougeray! Why, that is Madame Vignemal's château."

"Yes, mademoiselle, and Madame Vignemal is my cousin."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Germaine, surprised and greatly troubled.

"You are surprised, mademoiselle," said Pontac, smiling, "and you may well be so, for Madame Vignemal is very rich, and I have nothing but my pay to depend upon. It is precisely because I have nothing of my own that I don't desire to renew my intercourse with her. We quarrelled in former days, and I believe that she thinks I am dead. If I tried to return to her good graces I should be accused of coveting her wealth, about which I never trouble myself, and I do not wish to expose myself to unjust suspicion."

Germaine thought of telling the mournful news which it depended upon her to communicate to Lieutenant Pontac, but she did not dare to

speak. How could she tell this young man that his relative had just fallen victim to a fatal accident, and that this relative, ill-disposed towards her lawful heirs, had left everything to her husband?

"He would have but an unpleasant remembrance of our meeting if I became the messenger of evil," thought Mademoiselle Daudierne. "No, no, I will not tell him that Madame Vignemal is dead, and that she has disinherited him. He will know it soon enough, for the rumour of a catastrophe like that will soon reach the Duke de Bretteville's château."

"It will be very hard for me not to see you again," suddenly said Roger, in a voice which evinced deep emotion; "but I shall never forget that I have seen you, and I won't answer for not returning to the Roche-de-Lémon."

"I can assure you that you will not find me there again," said Mademoiselle Daudierne. "I shall have to relate my adventure, and heaven knows when I shall be allowed to ride out again. It will be asked why you keep aloof, and my uncle won't believe the reasons which you give as serious. He is capable of imagining that I am hiding something from him."

The officer started. Germaine had said the very thing to make him aware that she might be censured for imprudence.

"If you require it, mademoiselle," said he, after a silence, "I will make my appearance at La Germonière before I return to Africa."

"Why not to-day? If you return to the house with me I shan't be at all embarrassed about explaining what has taken place; but your absence will seem strange. Wouldn't it be better to act openly, especially as you have nothing to reproach yourself with? You have done all that a gentleman would do in such a case, and unless you have motives which I am ignorant of for not allowing my mother to thank you——"

"I have one," interrupted Roger, "and I am surprised that you have not guessed it, for you now know who I am."

"I know that you are an officer, that you have fought against the Arabs, and that the Duke de Bretteville honours you with his friendship. That is amply sufficient to open our doors to you."

Roger Pontac remained silent, to the utter amazement of Mademoiselle Daudierne, and the conversation abruptly ceased.

They had talked as they went on, and had come to a spot where the road turned to the right, away from the woods.

"Mademoiselle," said the young officer abruptly, "when we have passed beyond the rocky hillock which hides the view from you, you will see the trees of La Germonière, and you will be in no further danger of losing your way. The road will then take you straight to your garden-gate."

"You are going to desert me, then!" exclaimed Germaine.

"I must do so. You will not tell me to remain when you have heard my confession."

"Your confession?"

"Didn't you ask me to tell you why I condemned myself to refrain from seeing you again?"

"Yes."

"I should have been glad to abstain from answering, but I cannot lie. I fly from you because Lieutenant Pontac, who has no name, family, or fortune, cannot marry Mademoiselle Daudierne."

"I—I do not understand you," stammered Germaine, a deep blush mantling over her cheeks.

"If I went to your mother's house I should not have the courage to abstain from going there again, and if I committed the folly of returning, I should bring bitter sorrow upon myself."

"But, sir, there is no question of marriage in this, and I confess that I understand you less than ever."

"What! don't you understand that I am afraid lest I should fall in love with you?" replied Roger, lowering his voice.

At this avowal, which Germaine had perhaps anticipated, she turned very pale and grasped the reins which she had so far left free upon Ralph's neck. She felt, at last, that the danger of losing her way was not the only one she was exposed to, and her first impulse was to put an end to an interview which was becoming so peculiar.

"Have no fears, mademoiselle," resumed Lieutenant Pontac, in a different tone. "I have said all I have to say; I have only to add an appeal for you to pardon my brutal frankness, and prudence. You will form a bad opinion of me, and you surely did not suppose that there was a hussar officer in the world wise enough to take precautions against the impulses of his heart. I am certainly going against all the traditional customs of my 'corps,' but fortunately I am an exception to the rule."

This time Germaine asked herself whether the young officer was not simply making fun of her, but she had only to look at him to dismiss the thought. Roger Pontac tried to turn his declaration into pleasantry, but his eyes contradicted his smile. She then, at last, guessed that he was assuming this careless air to reassure her, and his delicacy deeply touched her feelings.

"He would love me as I wish to be loved," she thought.

She no longer had any idea of giving Ralph his head. Besides, he might have begun his capers once more.

"I told you that if you obliged me to speak out you would dismiss me, once for all," continued Roger, in a light tone. "The time has come to submit to my fate, and you will see, mademoiselle, that I am not wanting in courage, for I shall go uncomplainingly away."

"And without changing your resolve never to come to La Germonière?" asked Mademoiselle Daudierne, coquettishly. "Confess, sir, that it is mere childishness, and that you attach too much importance to a very simple incident. You have taken the trouble to bring me home. Without you I should, perhaps, have been obliged to spend the night in the open air. It is quite natural that a service rendered should lead to an acquaintance between yourself and my family. But between that and the consequences which terrify you there is a great distance. If you persist in refusing, you will wound me, I assure you; for I shall believe that I have inspired you with insurmountable antipathy, and I have the reverse of that feeling as regards yourself. I hope that, like you, I am frank enough," added Germaine, gaily. "Ah, you imagine that we have met as people do in novels, and that is the end of it! No, no, I don't wish to quarrel with the fairies of the Roche-de-Lémon. They would play me tricks if I contented myself with such excuses as yours. You will come, sir, and you will see that you have taken fright at nothing. I warn you, besides, that if you don't come, my uncle will go to look you up at Bretteville—I mean to thank you—and you will be obliged to return his visit. You will be cordially received, and you will go away as you came, heart-whole."

"I shall make the attempt," said Pontac, in a low tone. "I would give you my life, and I can, therefore, sacrifice my peace of mind to you."

"Then I rely upon you, although, all considered, I will for the present suffer you to leave me here. It is even better that you should not appear before mamma this evening. You would seem to be asking for a reward for bringing back a lost article. But, after to-morrow, I shall look for you every day."

The hussar officer bowed without replying, and Germaine darted off along the road without once turning her head. She was delighted at having withdrawn gracefully from a somewhat false situation, but she feared she might have said too much. She thought, however, even more than she had expressed.

III.

ARCY-SUR-BEUVRON has always been one of the quietest of provincial towns. Uncle Armand had done all he could to rouse it during his stay at La Germonière, but he had only half succeeded. The young people there became somewhat gayer, but the old citizens were not enlivened. Having formed set habits of an unvarying kind, they stand out fiercely against all innovations. They persist in dining at noon, and if they read the papers it is only to object to them and find new subjects for conversation. They like to deride the Parisians, and to seem to be well informed on all things. At heart, however, they care very little for literature or even for politics—about as much, in fact, as a fish cares for a flower. To economise is their only thought. They believe economy to be bliss, and they assert that a man's sole aim in life should be to die rich. They think and talk of money only, they pass their time in making it and in calculating the fortunes of others. They count up what fathers leave to their sons or daughters, cipher out incomes, sum up expenses, and whoever does not amass a certain amount of wealth is looked upon with dislike and convicted of an unpardonable offence; it is asserted that he is going to ruin, and the people thus accused become objects of contempt to the general public. To mortgage an estate even to buy another means a fall in the general estimation, while indebtedness is the same as stealing in the opinion of the citizens of Arcy.

They certainly have one excuse, which is that they have nothing else to do but to talk scandal and accumulate money. The town is mainly inhabited by people who live on their incomes, who look with contempt upon business, and who do not understand industrial enterprise.

The principal street, the Rue Nationale, has in half a century changed its name three or four times, but not its aspect. In ordinary times the passers-by walk along, two by two, slowly, silently, and soberly. They are in no hurry, and they have no ideas to exchange with one another. They count the paving-stones, and this amusement suffices them. Shopkeepers idle away their time and yawn upon their doorsteps. The houses themselves look weary. Nobody cares what o'clock it may happen to be; indeed the town clock might stop and the inhabitants of Arcy be none the wiser.

But when a great event—a local event—occurs in the midst of all this stagnation, Arcy suddenly awakens from its sleep, and becomes as lively as an anthill into which some one has thrown a pebble. If there is a household scandal, the town's folk watch the husband when he goes by to see how he takes the matter; and when there is any affair into which the

law can poke its fingers, they sedulously watch the going and coming of the public prosecutor.

On the morrow of the loss of the ferry-boat, the entire population of this sleepy sub-prefecture was aroused. The "Literary Rooms" were full all day, and there was incessant chatter. Some fanciful people declared that the death of the Vignemals was no accident at all, but the great majority were only concerned as to the consequences of this death so far as the reversion of the property was concerned. The existence of the wills leaving everything to the last survivor was well known; it was even known what notary had charge of them, and folks who were well learned in the law declared that Arthur du Pomméval would, by virtue of clause 722 of the Civil Code, inherit the large fortune of his aunt by marriage.

It may easily be surmised that his every movement was watched, and that his fellow-townsmen longed to congratulate him on his good fortune; but M. du Pomméval respected propriety, and behaved like a well-bred nephew. To show his grief he abstained from appearing in the street, and even from receiving his friends in the elegant little house which he occupied in the suburbs. It was stated that he had made a visit in the morning to Dr. Subligny—a very natural one, to be sure, as M. Subligny had been called upon the evening before to record and prove the double death, the bodies having been found in the afternoon at a long distance from La Germonière. But no one had spoken with the young heir, who, in forty-eight hours, had become the most important person in the district, and no one had caught sight of the doctor's broad-brimmed hat abroad. The worthy old gentleman was probably staying at home in order to make out his medical report.

He lived in the most solitary street of Arcy, and was lodged according to his tastes. The house which he had bought after ten years' practice was not large by any means, but was amply spacious for him, for he never thought of entertaining company, and his only attendant was a woman, who, in her younger days, had been a sutler-girl in his regiment, and who cooked fairly well—M. Subligny, be it mentioned, was fond of good living—and could also groom a horse. The garden—all the houses in Arcy have gardens—was entrusted to a man who worked by the day, and who was most successful in cultivating vegetables and flowers—vegetables especially—for the ex-head-surgeon of the First Regiment of Chasseurs d'Afrique never sacrificed the useful to the beautiful.

If the inquisitive folks of the town had only dared to go that day into the doctor's office, they might have garnered enough information to have lasted during an entire week as a subject of conversation—both at the club and in the respectable households where it was the fashion after dinner to talk scandal, and discuss other people's affairs.

The doctor's office was not handsomely furnished, and a Parisian medical man, however small his practice, would never have been willing to receive his patients in it; but the consultations which took place there with M. Subligny were quite as valuable as those for which one pays to fashionable physicians so high an honorarium. They were even more so, for Dr. Subligny took the trouble to examine his patients carefully, and he often cured them of their ailments.

The doctor's desk was of plain walnut, and he was not in the habit of displaying gold pieces upon it in order to stimulate the generosity of the patient who consulted him. His leather arm-chair had seen twenty years' service, like its owner, and the clock on the black marble mantelshelf was of the time of Louis Philippe. Some deal shelves, laden with books, and

four straw-seated chairs, almost always encumbered with papers, completed the simple furniture. The classic engraving representing Hippocrates refusing the presents of Artaxerxes did not adorn the walls, and noting its absence, one might well have quoted the familiar saying, "Good wine needs no bush," for M. Subligny was certainly the most disinterested physician in the world. He took care of the poor for nothing, and was satisfied with what was given him by the rich.

Since he had come among the inhabitants of Arcy, they had patronized him, and had benefited by doing so, but he was not merely consulted as a physician. He had the reputation of being a man of wisdom, and many folks came to ask him for advice on matters beyond the scope of his profession. On the day in question it was not a patient who was having an interview with him. The man seated in front of him was the picture of health. His stout figure, full face, and tranquil expression, were worthy of a canon of the church. But a magistrate often looks like a priest, and it precisely happened that this visitor was the presiding judge of the tribunal of Arcy, a native of the place, who had made his way there and had no desire to rise any higher. He was a judge such as is not often seen, and such as will soon disappear altogether.

Rich enough, and connected with the first families in Normandy, this model magistrate was, without doubt, the most important person in the town, and he seemed to have been born for the express purpose of meting out justice to his fellow-citizens. He knew them all, without exception; he knew everybody's antecedents and moral worth, and as he understood commercial and financial matters fairly well, the most complicated affairs never puzzled him. In fact he sifted them until he arrived at the truth, with the sterling common sense with which nature had so abundantly supplied him. He had a high opinion of Monsieur Subligny, and he must also have had very special esteem for him, for he had come to ask his opinion on a somewhat delicate matter.

"Well, then, my dear doctor," he said, after a short preamble, "you are sure that the death of these poor Vignemals is simply due to their remaining too long in the water."

"Perfectly sure, my dear judge," promptly replied the doctor, in the most positive tone. "In the first place, the bodies show no marks of violence. Madame Vignemal's remains are no doubt somewhat bruised and scratched, but she was caught by the feet in the roots of a willow-tree, and that is a sufficient explanation of the marks which I found upon her corpse. Besides, I performed the necropsy of both bodies last night at Le Fougeray, and I am able to affirm that both man and wife were alive when they fell into the water. They were simply drowned. To tell the truth, I really can't guess why the public prosecutor insisted upon my carrying out an operation which seems to me to have been an utterly superfluous one."

"I know why."

"You mean to say that he is zealous, too zealous, like all beginners."

"That's true," replied M. Lestrigon; "but there was another reason besides that. He suspects that there has been a crime committed."

"By the young gipsy lad who lives in a hut on the Fougeray grounds?" said Dr. Subligny. "Ah! the prosecutor didn't hide his opinion from me, but he is mistaken. I can answer for Roch Ferrer."

"Between ourselves, doctor, that young fellow does not amount to much," urged the presiding judge.

"I grant you that, but he has his good qualities, which you know nothing of. It isn't possible to accuse him. There was a witness who was present when the Vignemals got into the boat—a witness who can't be looked upon with suspicion, for he hates Roch Ferrer, and he was the servant of the Vignemals. He has been questioned, and he formally asserts that when his employers got into the boat there was no one on the banks of the Beuvron."

"That is to say, that he saw no one; but your gipsy was there, hidden in the thicket: in fact, he declared so himself."

"My reply to that," said the doctor, "is that the public prosecutor having turned and tormented him in every way, finally let him go; and it certainly wasn't because he did not wish to clap him in prison. I will add that Roch Ferrer repaid of his own accord to Le Fougeray, as soon as he knew that the inquiry was to be held there; and it would have been very easy for him: to escape questioning, for he has no fixed home, and might easily have walked fifteen miles between night and morning."

"Oh!" said the presiding judge, "if he tried to make off, the police would soon rout him out. He would be recognised anywhere, on account of his peculiar appearance, and his haste in presenting himself was perhaps only a skilful calculation."

"I see that you are prejudiced against this young fellow, and I don't undertake his defence; but I have a right to ask what could have been his motive in committing such a crime as you refer to. There is a Latin saying which expresses the point clearly: 'When there is a crime there is a motive.' Now I fail to see what benefit Roch Ferrer could derive from the death of the Vignemals."

"He would not derive any direct benefit from it, but others besides him might do so. Madame Vignemal has left some poor relations whom this gipsy undoubtedly knows, for they are peasants in the environs of Arcy."

"And you would infer that one of them has paid poor Roch to— Ah! I am sure that he has not undertaken any such task for pay. He despises money, and, besides, the people you refer to have none. Will you say that he did the deed to please a friend? No, that can't be. The accusation falls to the ground of itself."

"But, my dear doctor," rejoined the judge, "I don't accuse your favourite. I am trying to clear up the matter by talking it over with you. The question of inheritance will certainly be brought up, and I shall be called upon to settle it. Now, if a criminal trial took precedence of the civil suit, it would greatly change the state of things."

"There won't be a criminal trial; there can't be any, as the death of the two victims was purely accidental. I have so set forth the matter in my report, which is already handed in. I don't think that there can be any civil suit. The Code provides for the case in clause 722."

"So you can quote from the Code," said the judge, laughing. "Are you a lawyer, too? I didn't know that."

"I am content with being a doctor of medicine, but I have read the clauses referring to the 'presumption of survival.' I read them because I felt interested in young Pomméval, and I saw that, according to the provisions of clause 722, he would inherit all the property of the Vignemals."

"You have, no doubt, read that clause, my friend," rejoined the judge, "but you have misunderstood it. It is not applicable to arrangements made by will; and as Vignemal was only an heir in virtue of his wife's will—"

"The deuce! Are you sure of that?" interrupted the doctor.

"Perfectly sure. The question has been settled by numerous decisions. The last decree that the Dalloz repertory registered was, I believe, in 1850.

"But, good heavens!" cried Dr. Subligny, "this will greatly change my young friend's position. The poor young man has no idea of such a thing. He will lose everything."

"Why, pray?" asked the presiding judge. "He will bring forward the circumstances of the case, and if he can prove that his uncle was the survivor, if only by a moment, he will gain his suit. But he must prove that."

"How can he prove that his uncle survived his aunt?" asked the doctor incredulously.

"I don't know, and it isn't my affair," said M. Lestrigon; "but there are advocates at the Arcy bar who would be willing to undertake the case, and for that very reason I wish to be enlightened as to the morality of the vagabond who saw the accident. There will no doubt be an attempt to get round him, for if he declared, for instance, that Madame Vignemal still breathed when she was thrown ashore, it would——"

"He told me the reverse, and I'll guarantee that he will not contradict himself in court. Besides, he told me the condition of the body when he found it, and I have fully made up my mind on the subject. The poor woman was dead. It is even probable that she died before her husband did."

"Why?"

"Because she was much more courageous than poor Vignemal. She must have tried to save herself when she fell into the river; she must have struggled and striven and made violent efforts to draw breath. In such cases the water gets into the bronchial tubes, and suffocation ensues in thirty or forty seconds. Vignemal, on the contrary, must have been about half dead when the boat capsized. Fainting must have taken place at the same moment as immersion, and a man in a swoon can live under water for half an hour or so. Indeed, there have been instances of this. Respiration is suspended by the fainting fit, and air can be dispensed with for a certain length of time."

"I don't contest the value of this scientific hypothesis," said M. Lestrigon; "but how do you know that before the catastrophe the husband was paralysed by fear, while the wife retained her coolness?"

"Roch saw it all. He told me about it."

"Roch again!" exclaimed the presiding judge, testily. "Roch! The good-for-nothing fellow has certainly played a prominent part in this drama of the Beuvron—a part which does not appear to me to be very comprehensible."

"How is that?" asked Dr. Subligny. "Roch behaved very courageously, and I swear to you that it was no fault of his if the Vignemals perished, for he risked his life in trying to save them. It was while he was swimming out to try and stop the boat as it was borne on by the current that he witnessed the last moments of the unfortunate couple. The husband had sunk down to the bottom of the boat, so terrified that he did not know what he was doing. His wife, on the contrary, was standing up and trying to throw off some of her garments. She no doubt intended to leap into the water and swim ashore, and she had already begun to unbutton the bodice of her dress when the boat suddenly sunk."

"You are now telling me, my dear doctor, what the gipsy told you,"

replied the judge, shaking his head. "I hope that he has told you the truth, and that he will be let alone; and, besides, there is no talk of arresting him as yet. Still, I may as well tell you that it has been decided to watch him."

"If the people only want to catch him in the act of poaching at night-time, or laying snares, the matter can be easily managed," said Dr. Subligny.

"That's nothing," retorted the judge; "but the public prosecutor suspects that this Roch Ferrer has come to some understanding with another bad fellow, a relation of Madame Vignemal's, and who might inherit from her."

"But this is perfectly absurd. One of the Fougeray servants was there, as you know, and he asserts that——"

"I don't think he can assert much, as he ran off at the first cry of distress he heard, and he scarcely saw anything that occurred afterwards. But even if the gipsy did no more than saw the rope of the ferry-boat asunder on the morning or evening of the accident, he will still be liable to a criminal prosecution."

"Ah! that, now, is quite inadmissible, my dear judge. Supposing that Roch had wished to send the Vignemals to another world, at all events he could not guess that they would cross the river that very night; and again, why should he have been so desirous of drowning them? To enrich some fellow who happens to be Madame Vignemal's cousin? But every one round about Arcy was well aware that the husband and wife had made their wills in each other's favour, and Roch certainly did not know aught as to 'presumptions of survival,' and their application in cases of inheritance. He never studied law, this man of the woods."

"I grant you that," said the judge, "and it is perhaps on that account that the gipsy fished up the wife and not the husband. He brought her up, and threw her back into the water when he found that she was not yet dead."

"But, in that case," urged Dr. Subligny, "he would have said that she was not dead; he would have told it everywhere, as to accomplish his purpose it was necessary that she should survive her husband—he must have believed so, at all events."

"He may have reasons which I know nothing of for remaining silent; for instance, he may have been afraid of being compromised in a strange affair, and he perhaps intends to speak out when he thinks that the time has come for serving his comrade without compromising himself."

"You really surprise me? You are showing me a Roch Ferrer," exclaimed the doctor, "altogether different from the man I know. The Roch Ferrer of my mind is a violent fellow, quite capable of murder in a moment of passion, but incapable of premeditating a crime—incapable, above all, of committing a crime for money."

"He belongs, however, to a race which possesses innate cunning," rejoined the judge.

"His father was a gipsy, it is true, but training alters instinct, and Roch was brought up by the 'Christian Brothers,' who know him and think of him exactly as I do. The young fellow cannot be a party to any plot, for he sees no one. He lives in the woods and fields. He has not even built himself a house, like Robinson Crusoe. The peasants think him mad, and don't associate with him. I can never believe that any one of them has dared to propose a compact to the Fougeray savage, as he is called."

"My dear doctor," said the judge, after a short pause, "I have absolute confidence in your discretion, and I am about to prove it by telling you what the public prosecutor said to me. He has been informed of the presence in this part of the country of an individual who left here in disgrace, a young fellow who is one of Madame Vignemal's cousins."

"What! Are you talking of little Roger?" asked the doctor, in unfeigned amazement.

"Yes; of Roger Pontac, the son of a poor devil who formerly farmed for the Duke de Bretteville, and who died very poor."

"I knew Roger very well," said M. Subligny. "He was an excellent fellow and remarkably intelligent. I was very much interested in him, and I went to see him several times at Saint Louis College, where he was studying at his cousin's expense. I was grieved to hear that he ran away at the end of his term, when he was a student of philosophy, but I was not greatly surprised. Madame Vignemal wished to make him follow a career which was unsuited to him, and, besides, she was very niggardly as to his allowance. The young fellow did not care to live on charity, so he ran off one day and was seen no more. I thought that he must have turned a soldier; such was his true vocation. But you say that he has been seen at Arcy?"

"Not at Arcy. He did not dare appear there; but he has been seen prowling round about Le Fougeray, and the public prosecutor has heard of it."

"Through whom?"

"Through the gardener at Le Fougeray, who saw him looking at the house," replied the presiding judge.

"Didn't he speak to him?"

"No. Pontac went off when he saw that he was being watched."

"That's strange, and all the stranger as he has no motive whatever for hiding himself that I know of. His cousin had no serious complaint against him. If he had gone to see her, she would have received him coldly, I think, but she would not have sent him away, and there is nothing to prevent him from showing himself at Arcy. He is almost unknown there now, and he has no debts in the place, for he hasn't been there since his childhood. I am surprised that he did not call on me, and I confess that I should be pleased to have a visit from him."

"I advise you not to expect him, my dear doctor. A man of that sort can have nothing to say to you."

"But where does he live, if he is here?"

"No one knows. He may have gone away. But he can be found," promptly replied the presiding judge.

"Your public prosecutor imagines, then, that Roger Pontac came here expressly to make a compact with Roch Ferrer so as to get rid of the Vignemals?"

"Such is his idea, I must confess it," said the judge. "I give it to you for what it is worth, however."

"Well, the prosecutor lacks common sense, allow me to say so. Roger Pontac never beheld Roch Ferrer in his life, and he is unaware of his very existence, for Roch came here while Roger was studying in Paris. How could the two poor fellows concert together to commit this crime?"

"They may perhaps have met in the woods or on the banks of the Beuvron, and as they are fitted to understand one another, they had no difficulty in agreeing."

The doctor thought for a moment, and then replied with remarkable firmness: "I will never believe it. Roch is an independent fellow, a poacher, but not an assassin. As for Roger, I cannot answer for him as for my outlaw. I have not seen him for ten years now, and he may have been spoiled by a life of adventure; but if he has remained as he was, he has not had a share in any infamous act: his nature was upright, although impulsive, and besides his impulses were always good. Moreover, as I said before, I don't see how Roch could have so planned an accident to lead to Monsieur Vignemal's being drowned before his wife. These combinations are altogether too complicated, and I'll venture to say that neither he nor his assumed accomplice ever saw the Civil Code."

"As regards this Pontac, my dear doctor," said the judge, "you may be mistaken. But let us abandon this disagreeable subject. I did not mention it for any other reason than to give you an opportunity of telling me what you might know of a favourable character respecting a young man in whom you are interested. Now that I have heard what you have to say, I admit that he may be wrongfully suspected, and I shall not trouble myself about him."

"You think, then," asked Dr. Subligny, "that Pomméval won't lose his uncle's inheritance."

"Excuse me, my dear doctor; I cannot give you my opinion as to a suit which I shall, no doubt, be called upon to try. I can't tell you what may be its result. If I gave my views I could not discuss them. 'All that I can tell you is that justice is not satisfied with 'unsupported testimony,' and that Roch Ferrer's evidence is looked upon with suspicion, even with great suspicion. Your favourite might even venture to say that Madame Vignemal spoke to him when he found her caught in the willow boughs, but this would not suffice."

"My dear judge, I am delighted to hear you say so! What you tell me augurs well for Arthur du Pomméval, who came to see me this very morning."

"Indeed?" said the judge with an ironical smile. "He came, I suppose, to find out what might be his chances of securing the inheritance?"

"No; he came about quite another matter. I will not say that he is in deep grief, you wouldn't believe it; but he showed no unseemly delight. Besides, he expects that the property will be disputed."

"If it reverts to him he won't be as stingy as his uncle was. But Heaven knows how he will spend his money. It may go in buying horses, betting at races, and champagne suppers."

"That is what I feared; but since I have seen him, I am reassured as to that. He has a plan, which I greatly approve of, and one that will curtail all his youthful follies."

"Is he going to marry, then?"

"Excuse me, my dear judge, if I say no more. It is still a secret; one that all Arcy will soon know, but which I have promised to keep, and——"

The doctor did not finish what he was saying, for the door of his office opened, and Jeannette, the ex-sutler girl of the Chasseurs d'Afrique, came in, holding a card, which she handed to her master. M. Subligny glanced at the square of pasteboard, and was surprised to read upon it the name of Roger Pontac.

"Some patient, I presume," said the judge. "I am going, my dear doctor. You musn't make your patients wait."

"Oh, this one is in no hurry," said M. Subligny, and turning to the

servant, who, after making a military salute like a man, stood waiting at the door, he said : " Jeannette, take that gentleman into the parlour, and tell him that I will be with him in an instant."

The worthy doctor had his reasons for not wishing to bring Roger Pontac face to face with a judge who did not appear to be well disposed towards him. He did not care to mention Roger's name, either, and so he hastily slipped his card into his pocket. The judge had risen, and was now buttoning up his overcoat. Jeannette made another salute, and turned on her heels.

" I am very much obliged to you for having let me know the views of the authorities," said Dr. Subligny ; " I shall find out all I can from Roch Ferrer himself——"

" Don't forget, pray, that my information is strictly confidential," interrupted the magistrate. " It is the friend, and not the judge, who spoke."

" Don't be alarmed," responded the doctor. " It is my business to be discreet. I shall question Roch carefully, and I think that I can promise you that I shall soon know the truth as to the alleged relations between the gipsy and Roger Pontac. I am obliged to go to La Germonière this very day, and Roch never stays far from Madame Daudierne's park."

" How is that worthy good lady, and how are her charming daughters?" asked M. Lestrigon.

" They had a great deal of excitement yesterday. The accident happened at the end of their garden, and I am going there for the purpose of telling them what has been said about it."

" If young Pomméval knew what he was about," remarked the judge, " he would marry the elder girl. But I suppose that he will want to marry the daughter of some rich banker in Paris."

" I have reasons for thinking the contrary," replied Dr. Subligny, with a smile. " And I am delighted to hear that you don't despair of his being the heir."

" I still speak as a friend. It is understood that I shall decide according to my conscience."

" I am sure of that," exclaimed the doctor, pressing the judge's hand as he escorted him to the street door. " That is precisely what gives me so much hope, for Arthur's cause is a good one."

" I trust so," replied the judge ; " and I am not at all interested in Madame Vignemal's little cousin, who turns up three days before his relative's tragical demise."

The ex-army surgeon closed his door and returned thoughtfully into the hall of his small house. " The fact is," he said to himself, " that the unexpected return of this young man is somewhat strange. I have always had a good opinion of him ; but I don't know how he has been living for the last ten years or so. What can he want with me ? Help, perhaps ? I shall not refuse it, of course, but I shall advise him to take himself off from these parts. It is always disagreeable to have anything to do with the public prosecutor, even when a man has nothing on his conscience."

Then calling Jeannette, who was at the further end of the hall, the doctor asked : " How does the gentleman look who is in the parlour ?"

" He is dressed like a prince, major, and is a fine handsome fellow, that is certain ; and as for his bearing, it is easy to see that he has been a soldier. If he isn't decorated with the Legion of Honour it is only because he is too young yet, but I'm sure he deserves the cross, for he has a scar across his forehead, and if I'm not mistaken it is from a yataghan."

"Ah, indeed!" said the doctor, reassured by this description. "Well, bring him to me, and don't let any one else in here until he has gone."

A moment afterwards, Roger Pontac entered Dr. Subligny's office. The latter stared at him in mute surprise. The lad whom he had known so pale and slender and unbecomingly attired, much too short and narrow, had expanded into a handsome sunburnt young man—tall, muscular, and elegantly clad in a black suit which fitted him to perfection.

"You don't know me, Monsieur Subligny," said the new-comer, smiling. "I have changed very much, have I not?"

"Yes, my lad, changed to your advantage. You look superb! Have you made a fortune?" asked the worthy doctor.

"I? oh, no! I'm not much richer than when you used to come to see me at Saint Louis College," was the reply.

"The deuce you are not! Then you must owe some money to your tailor, for you are dressed according to the latest fashions. Tell me, what is your profession?"

"Did you not see that by my card?"

"I only saw your name, to my utter astonishment, for it is ten years since I last heard of you, and I did not know whether you were alive or dead. But I have your card here," added Dr. Subligny, putting his hand in his pocket, "and as you won't tell me your calling yourself, I must consult the pasteboard. What! a sub-lieutenant of the 9th Hussars? Are you an officer?"

"I have only been one for three months; and, as I volunteered in 1873, you see that I have been such a long time a mere soldier. It isn't my fault, for I haven't spared myself."

"An officer! that's magnificent!" cried the doctor, whose face grew brighter and brighter. "You have won your epaulets in eight years and yet you had neither influence, family, nor money. Ah! I knew very well that you were a fine fellow, and would make your way in the army. Give me your hand, Roger; and sit down and let us talk."

The young man grasped the doctor's hand, and took his seat on the chair which the judge, who thought so ill of Madame Vignemal's poor relations, had just vacated. "You don't know how glad I am to see you," said he, with emotion which he did not attempt to conceal. "You were so kind to me, formerly. I never forgot your visits to the school where I was so completely alone, and where I was even left during the vacations."

"That is all very well; but why have you never given any signs of life after the running away with which you wound up your studies? I heard that you had come here lately, but that was all, and I didn't believe it."

"I had decided not to reappear until I had made up for my escapade by rising to the rank which was my ambition. I was in Tunis when I was made a sub-lieutenant, and I did not lose an hour in asking for a leave of absence. But I did not foresee, when I did so, that my cousin had so sad a fate before her. What a death!"

"Ah, so you know that she was accidentally drowned, then?" said Dr. Subligny, frowning. "How did you know of it? Did you go to Le Fougeray?"

"No, doctor, I did not dare appear there, although I wished very much to do so; for Madame Vignemal took care of me from my infancy, and I owed her a debt of gratitude. I once went as far as the garden gate, but I hadn't the courage to ring the bell. I was afraid of a cold reception."

"It seems that the gardener saw you," remarked Dr. Subligny.

"Perhaps he did. I wasn't hiding; but I must tell you that I did not go in. The day after I received the official news of my promotion I wrote a letter to my cousin, in which I explained to her the cause of my prolonged silence, and begged her to forget the past and receive me when I returned to France. She did not reply to me, however."

"That is good," said the doctor to himself. "That letter may perhaps be found, and it will prove that—but no matter now! Where have you been staying since you came here?" he added aloud. "You did not put up at a hotel at Arcy, did you?"

"No, I am staying at the Château de Bretteville."

"What! with the duke?"

"Yes, indeed. I accepted an invitation to be his guest during my sojourn in France."

"And to what do you owe the honour of being lodged at the house of this great nobleman, who does not condescend to receive the citizens of Arcy?"

"To a very painful circumstance. His son, who was a lieutenant in my squadron, was killed at my side while making a charge upon the Arabs. I received, in defending him, a sword cut, of which you can see the scar; and although I wasn't able to save his life, I succeeded in rescuing his body from the hands of the enemy, and I had the consolation of bringing his father his cross of the Legion of Honour."

"And the duke received you as a friend?" exclaimed Dr. Subligny. "You have done well, Roger, you have done well. I was right in saying that you were a worthy fellow."

"Did any one say that I was not?" asked the young officer, smiling.

"No, not exactly that; but when I think that the fool of a public prosecutor—but let us talk of something else, my lad! I can understand that you hesitated to present yourself at Madame Vignemal's château, but, to speak frankly, I owe you a grudge for your not coming to see me. Bretteville isn't far off, and——"

"Just think, doctor, I should have been recognised if I had shown myself in the streets of Arcy, and the rumour of my being here would have reached Le Fougeray."

"True, I understand! You were afraid that your cousin would be angry if you gave me the preference," remarked the doctor.

"You have guessed what I mean," said Roger. "I have no such fear now, however, as the poor woman is dead. I came to you as soon as I could do so. I was anxious to tell you that I had never forgotten your kindness, and to solicit your friendship and advice."

"My friendship you have, and now tell me what I can advise you about. Not your health, I hope? You are quite healthy, are you not?"

"I have not been twenty-four hours in a hospital since I entered the service. But I wish you to tell me what I ought to do. Everybody knows that Madame Vignemal ceased to care for me, and even to like me."

"That is no reason for keeping away from her funeral, which will take place to-morrow. I strongly urge you to attend it," replied the doctor.

"Then, I will go, doctor, but I assure you that it will be a painful duty, for I am sincerely sorry for her death."

"You undoubtedly know," resumed M. Subligny, after a pause, "that by a very old will she left everything she possessed to her husband?"

"No, I did not know it," said Roger, with indifference.

"Yes, my lad, and now her fortune will probably go to Monsieur Vignemal's nephew, Arthur du Pomméval."

"Little Pomméval, who was always so neatly dressed when the other boys of his age were tearing their clothes by climbing trees?" said Roger. "Well, so much the better! If he has turned out what he promised to be, he must like to spend money on his attire. Monsieur Vignemal's money will just suit him."

"But, you unlucky fellow! this fortune is your cousin's, and it reverts to Pomméval to your loss."

"Was I her heir, then?"

"Heir to a part of the property, you innocent fellow! and this part is worth regretting; your cousin must have left between one and two millions, and on her side there are only five or six relatives to claim the money."

"Upon my word, I had no idea of that!" exclaimed Roger Pontac. "I thought that my cousin had nearer relations than myself, or rather, I never troubled myself with thinking what would become of her money. And, really, I declare to you that I don't regret it. My pay is enough for me."

"You are the same as you used to be," said the doctor, looking at Roger with affectionate emotion. "You have faith in yourself, and you don't expect anything from those chances which often enrich a man. You are right, and I am sure that you will succeed by your own merit. I like your courage, and I beg that you will always rely upon me."

"Well, doctor," said Roger, "there is a service I will ask of you."

"So much the better! Speak, my lad! What can I do for you?"

"You can, I believe, introduce me to Monsieur Daudierne, the brother-in-law of Madame Daudierne, who bought La Germonière ten years ago."

"If that is all," said the doctor, "nothing could be easier. I am the family physician. But why the deuce do you want to become acquainted with Monsieur Daudierne? How do you know anything about him?"

"I am not at all acquainted with him," replied Roger, "and it is precisely because I have never seen him that I need some one to introduce me, so as to fulfil a mission which I have undertaken concerning him."

"From whom?"

"From the Duke de Bretteville. He has heard that Monsieur Daudierne is a great sportsman, and would be glad to have permission to shoot over the Bretèche woods, which are full of game. The duke wishes to be agreeable to him, and he would have gone himself to invite him to shoot his deer and pheasants, if he had not been in mourning for his son. Since then he does not see any one but me, as I am able to talk to him about poor Henri."

"And he sends you as an ambassador to La Germonière? That is all the more gracious on his part, as he has always avoided all intercourse with the people about here. He is said to be very haughty."

"He is not so, doctor. He holds to his position, but he has no caste prejudices."

"The proof of that is that he has offered you hospitality, although you are the son of one of his farmers. The exception made in your favour is greatly to your honour, my boy, and I approve of your having accepted it. So you are lodged at the château, and are the guest, almost the friend, of one of the greatest noblemen in France, a duke who has five hundred thousand francs' income. And I thought that——"

"What did you think, doctor?" asked Roger Pontac, gaily. "Did you think that I slept out in the open air?"

"Not exactly; but I thought that you had taken up your abode with some peasant near Le Fougeray. I knew that you had been seen, but I was not aware that you had become a brilliant officer. And as you have some relations among the farmers round about here——"

"Relations whom I scarcely know, and who have never helped me," retorted Roger. "Thank heaven! I need no one, and do not care to claim cousinship with them. If the duke hadn't invited me to stay at Bretteville, and so cordially, too, I should have quietly gone to the Hôtel de Bretagne in the High Street at Arcy, and my first visit would have been for you, doctor. I should have begged you to try and reconcile me with Madame Vignemal——"

"And I should, perhaps, have succeeded," said the doctor. "Your epaulets, so bravely won, would have pleased her as a relative, and your repentance would have touched her feelings. In a word, it is very unfortunate for you that she is dead. But, to return to your other cousins, I warn you that they may soon claim relationship with you, and call at Bretteville."

"Oh, I don't blush on their account, and if I can be useful to them——"

"Oh! that's not the question," exclaimed the doctor; "but it is said that Arthur du Pomméval is going to plead against them respecting the Vignemal property."

"Well, they can carry on the suit without me."

"Indeed!" cried Dr. Subligny. "Will you refuse to join issue with them if the suit takes place?"

"Yes, of course I shall!" replied Roger. "I have a perfect horror of the law."

"You may be sure that they will come to propose a compact to you."

"I shall send them off, never fear. It would be a pretty thing to see a hussar running about among lawyers! I would rather return to Africa at once, doctor."

"You are right, Roger, a hundred times right! Besides, these people will lose their suit, and I think that you will do right in keeping aloof from their proceedings. If they even gained the action your right would be the same. You would share the inheritance like the others."

"I! But I don't wish to inherit. A fortune would be a burden to me."

"As for that, my lad, you are wrong! Money does no harm, not even to a soldier. I have known some who were millionaires, and went into action as bravely as any one. Even as regards making a desirable marriage——"

"You forget, doctor, that I am only a sub-lieutenant."

"No doubt! but you may become a commanding officer later on, and were you merely a captain, you wouldn't be sorry to marry the woman whom you loved. When a man has no money he has no choice, and has to marry as best he may. However, while you are waiting for your matrimonial hour to strike, you wish to be introduced to Monsieur Daudierne?"

"Yes; it would be more proper, I think. I should not be obliged to state my name and rank, myself, then; whereas if I went alone, Monsieur Daudierne might take me for some overseer of the Duke de Bretteville's."

"He has too much tact, and is too much accustomed to good society, to

make such a mistake," replied Dr. Subligny. "But no matter—it will be better for me to introduce you. And it so happens that I have to go to La Germonière this very day. Shall I take you with me now?"

"If you will, doctor; however, I hope that I shall not be in your way."

"Not at all! I shall be delighted to take you with me. There are two seats in my tilbury, and my mare must already be put to, for Jeanette has orders to have the vehicle ready at three o'clock, and she is as punctual as an old trooper. You know that she was with a cavalry regiment?"

"I suppose so, as she has charge of your cavalry."

"Oh!" said the doctor, laughing, "my cavalry consists of one horse only. However, let us start. You are ready, I see, for you are dressed for visiting. Well, just give me time to put on my best hat, and we will be off. Wait for me here and have a smoke, if you like. My patients are used to the smell of tobacco. I always have the old pipe that I used when I was in the army, and I light it when I am working in my office in the evening."

Saying these words, the doctor went out, and Roger Pontac remained alone with his reflections. Dr. Subligny's welcome had charmed and affected him. He felt stronger, now that he was sure that he had not lost the friendship of the worthy man who had, in former times, comforted and sustained him. It seemed to him that he was no longer alone in the world, and that his life was about to assume a new aspect. He found what he had lacked for ten years—affection, a supporter, almost a father. He could not add—a confidant, for he did not dare tell the doctor that if he wished to visit La Germonière it was not merely for the purpose of inviting uncle Armand to shoot over the forest of La Bretèche.

Roger Pontac had returned to the château de Bretteville on the evening before in a state of agitation which had not escaped the clear-seeing eyes of the old duke; and Roger, when gently questioned by the kindest of hosts, had told him everything. He had even consulted him as to what he ought to do, and, to his great surprise, the duke had advised him to go to see his country neighbours without troubling himself as to the results of the romance begun beside the Roche-de-Lémon.

"You must find it very tiresome here, my dear lad," the indulgent nobleman had remarked. "Why shouldn't you go and divert yourself at La Germonière after our sad chats? If I could for one moment forget my sorrow I would go with you. But I beg of you to inform Monsieur Daudierne that my woods are open to him. Your scruples as regards his niece are exaggerated. An officer like yourself is on an equality with the daughter of a simple citizen, however honourable the latter's position may have been. Let the result of your chance acquaintance be what it may, I am certain that you will behave like a gentleman. So go where fate bids you go."

Roger was only too ready to follow the advice given him by a man whose rank, age, and experience authorised him to speak as he did. He grew a little bolder, and gradually ventured so far as to ask the duke how he ought to approach Madame Daudierne. Should he tell her of his meeting with her daughter, or make use of the convenient pretext of an invitation with which the duke had charged him for uncle Armand? The duke was in favour of the last expedient.

"No one can tell what a young girl may do under such circumstances," he said, smiling. "Mademoiselle Daudierne told you that she meant to

tell her mother everything. She may, however, change her mind before to-morrow, and you had certainly better wait till her mother mentions the matter. If she says nothing about it, it will be that she knows nothing of it, and in that case it will not be your place to tell her."

Roger Pontac shared his noble protector's views on this subject, and took care not to make any objections to the plan thus arranged. He longed for the morrow, and he could not sleep all night. For the first time in his life his heart opened to an unknown feeling. It was not, to be sure, his first love-affair. The eight years he had spent in a regiment had not been without a few passing flirtations. But he had been no garrison Don Juan. He had put on his uniform for the purpose of fighting, and rising in the world with the help of his good sword; and after fighting heroically in Algeria and Tunis, he had at last risen from the ranks. He was of some importance in the great family of the army, and saw ahead of him in a distant future the stars of generalship, that highest ambition of the French soldier, now that a marshal's baton has become a thing of the past.

He had reached that moment when a man's life is marked out for him, and Heaven had placed upon his path an adorable young girl whom he would never have dared to approach had he met her in society—in that society which had always been closed to him, but which he had now the right to enter with his head erect. This charming Germaine was under obligations to him, and she had authorised him to visit her. There was almost a secret between them. This was too much. However greatly inclined to prudence, a young man of twenty-seven could not resist such powerful temptation, and so the duke's motto, "Come what may, if honour be but safe," had triumphed over Roger's last scruples.

In the morning he prepared everything for his first visit to La Germonière. He preferred to go there on one of the horses which the Duke de Bretteville had placed at his disposal, and he repaired to the stables to give some orders to an ostler. It was then that, from a conversation between a couple of grooms, he heard of the sad accident on the Beuvron.

No one at the château knew that the duke's young guest was Madame Vignemal's cousin, and Roger had sufficient presence of mind not to allow it to be seen that the event interested him. However, the news somewhat changed his plans. It imposed certain duties upon him, and he immediately thought of calling upon the worthy doctor, whom he reproached himself with having so long neglected. He wished to tell him his history, relate his perplexities, and ask how it would appear if he attended his cousin's funeral. The idea also occurred to Roger of asking the doctor to introduce him to the inmates of La Germonière. He knew that Dr. Subligny was Madame Daudierne's medical man, and also attended her daughters and her servants; and he thought that the assistance of the family physician would not be amiss under the circumstances.

He now had no cause to regret having appealed to him. The doctor had received him as an old friend, was now about to open the doors of the house to him, to recommend and encourage him, and, later on, if the poor lieutenant's hopes assumed a better shape and the meeting at the foot of the Roche-de-Lémon led to anything serious, Dr. Subligny would perhaps not refuse to say a word on his behalf.

Roger Pontac was thinking of all this when the doctor reappeared, dressed in black from head to foot, including a black cravat and gloves of the same shade. He did not, as a rule, pay so much attention to his dress.

"You never saw me so fine, did you?" he asked, laughing. "Don't I look solemn? It does not amuse me to dress up like this, but for to-day it must be so."

"Of course, as you are going to pay a visit to Madame Daudierne," said Roger Pontac, who was far from suspecting the truth.

"Oh, it isn't that!" retorted the doctor. "I am very well received at La Germonière when I appear in my every-day attire. The lady of the castle is no formalist, and her brother, whom you mean to invite shooting, treats me as a friend. But this is a special occasion. Yes, my lad! I may tell you that much, as you have nothing to do with the tittle-tattle of our little village. I am entrusted with a mission. I am going to ask, officially, for the hand of one of the Demoiselles Daudierne, not for myself, of course," added the doctor, laughing heartily.

At this unexpected news Roger turned pale and remained silent. His agitation was so apparent that M. Subligny noticed it and asked: "What ails you, my boy? You look so strange! Any one would think that I had told you some bad news."

"Nothing ails me," replied the lieutenant, "I assure you. I only feel a trifle giddy. Your office is so very warm."

"The fact is that Jeannette has a way of piling up the fire so as to make it hot enough to roast an ox, as though, in fact, I were still camping out in the mountains of Kabylia. I don't know why I imagined that my embassy to La Germonière might annoy you. But you are surely not thinking of marrying either of the Daudierne young ladies, for you don't know them."

"Certainly—of course," stammered Roger Pontac, and overcoming his confusion he added: "I was afraid that I might inconvenience you by going with you. Under such circumstances a stranger is in the way."

"In the first place, you are not a stranger. I have known you ever since you were born, and you will soon become acquainted with the inmates of La Germonière. I give you my word that you don't inconvenience me in the least."

"But I can't be present at the conversation as to matrimonial matters, which you will necessarily have with Madame Daudierne," said Pontac, with a forced smile.

"That would hardly be proper, as you say," rejoined the doctor, in a gay tone. "Such matters are arranged in private, and the strictest secrecy is required always, until the day when the marriage is triumphantly announced. I ought not to have told you my object in going to La Germonière. But you won't repeat it everywhere, as you see no one but the Duke de Bretteville, who takes little interest, I presume, in the talk of the neighbourhood. Besides, I am sure that you are discreet. Never mind. I will say no more. As for any inconvenience arising from your presence at the château while I am making the proposal, you need not be alarmed, my lad, for everything will go on smoothly. There is perfect liberty at La Germonière. Madame Daudierne sits in the drawing-room, the young ladies walk about the garden or draw in the study, Monsieur Daudierne shoots rabbits on the banks of the Beuvron, and visitors do as they please. They are at home there. I will introduce you to the hostess, to whom you can tell the purpose of your visit. If her brother is out, you can start off in search of him, unless you prefer to talk to the young ladies, who are very pretty, both of them, and very intelligent. When once I have introduced you, I shall ask permission to say a few words in private

to Madame Daudierne. This will take up half an hour, and if I have a favourable reply you will know of it before any one else, as we shall return together. You must dine with me."

"I should be only too happy, my dear doctor, but I promised Monsieur de Bretteville to be back at seven o'clock."

"Then you must dine with me some other time. Let us go and set Jeannette at liberty. She is mounting guard over the tilbury and the mare."

Roger had a great mind to raise some fresh objections, for the journey to La Germonière was much less agreeable to him now that Subligny had explained the motives for his own visit to Madame Daudierne. But how could he refuse to be introduced by the doctor, after asking him to present him? It would almost be a betrayal of his secret hopes. The old doctor was very discerning, in spite of his bluntness and abrupt manner; and he might very well guess what his young favourite wished to conceal. Besides, Roger hoped to be able to draw him out during the ride. One of the Daudierne young ladies was to have an offer, but which one? The poor lover preferred to know the truth while he could still hide in the utmost depths of his heart the feelings which agitated it.

The tilbury was ready and waiting at the garden gate under the vigilant eye of the ex-sutler girl, who wore a stripe on the arm of her dress. The doctor called the strange vehicle a "tilbury," although it looked like nothing known to man. It had some of the features of a phaeton, a victoria, and an old-fashioned cab combined. The body rested on four wheels, with a seat in front and another in the rear, and there was a moveable hood and a bracket-seat besides.

"My trap isn't stylish," remarked Monsieur Subligny, "but it's solid, and that is the main thing in going over the stony roads of the district. I was saying so this morning to Pomméval, but he doesn't heed me, and will have his vehicles from Paris. One of these fine days he will find one of them breaking down while he is on the way to La Germonière. Get in, Roger; it is time to be off!"

"I have it!" thought Roger, at this moment. "It is Pomméval who has asked the doctor to make an offer of marriage for him, and he won't be rejected now that he is rich! Heaven grant that he may have chosen—the other one!"

Dr. Subligny had now gathered up the reins, Roger seated himself at his side and waited till he chose to complete his revelations, by mentioning which one of the two sisters the rich heir of the Vignemals meant to honour with his preference.

The mare which the doctor guided easily enough—the seat intended for a coachman not being occupied at all—started off at a slow trot, and after a few turns entered the Rue Nationale. There were numerous loungers there, and, as may be well imagined, the sight of Dr. Subligny, with a young stranger beside him, was commented upon in every possible tone. The direction taken by the vehicle showed that it was going to La Germonière, and various busybodies soon concluded that the stranger was a suitor for the hand of one of Madame Daudierne's daughters. The report spread with electrical rapidity, and three quarters of an hour after, all Arcy knew it. But no one had recognised young Pontac, who in former years had rambled through the woods of Le Fougeray in a blouse and wooden shoes.

"You see, my dear boy," cried Dr. Subligny, "they don't remember

you, all those idlers. I am delighted at it, for you would gain nothing by knowing them or keeping their company. The peasants have a better memory, unfortunately, as one of them spoke of the walk which you took in your cousin's woods."

"Unfortunately? Why? I have a right to go wherever I please," remarked Roger Pontac, in surprise.

"No doubt," retorted the doctor, "but good nature is not the distinctive trait of the people of Arcy. You have no idea of the absurdities they invent. But you don't mind them, and you are right. And, speaking of their inventions, just tell me, did you ever meet Roch Ferrer?"

"Roch Ferrer? I never heard that name before."

"Good! but perhaps you know the man who is called by it? A young fellow some twenty years old, who lives in the woods like an Indian of the Huron tribe, and poaches where he pleases. You may have met him setting some snares on the land belonging to the Duke de Bretteville."

"He would not venture to do that; the woods of La Bretèche are too well guarded. And to prevent this marauder from destroying the game, I will speak of him to-night to Monsieur de Bretteville's head gamekeeper."

"Pray don't do that! The lad interests me. I have two or three times set his broken limbs for him, and I have the weakness to become attached to my patients, as though I were still in the regiment."

"Why doesn't he enlist instead of prowling about? I shall advise him to do so if I come across him," said Roger.

"He wouldn't follow your advice, and I advise you strongly not to speak to him if you do happen to meet with him."

"I have no especial desire to enter into conversation with your favourite, my dear doctor, I assure you; but how shall I know him when I see him?"

"Oh! you could not mistake him. He doesn't look either like a peasant or like a dandy. He has a dark complexion, hair as black as jet——"

"He must be a kind of gipsy."

"Yes. But I'm sure that I don't know why I am talking about him to you."

M. Subligny was not candid in this last statement, for it was not in the least by chance that he had mentioned the name of Roch Ferrer. He wished to make sure that the suppositions of the public prosecutor were unfounded, and Roger's frank replies had quite settled the question in his mind; but he did not think that he was called upon to acquaint the young officer with the ridiculous suspicions of which he was the object. He thought for a moment of telling him in what way Roch had witnessed the death of the Vignemals, and this would have been quite natural; but, on consideration, he remained silent. He decided that it was useless to give any occasion for a meeting between the two men, whom a newly-appointed magistrate accused so absurdly of having conspired together to commit a crime. He even asked himself now whether it would not be better to abstain, when introducing Roger at La Germonière, from mentioning his relationship to Madame Vignemal.

"Why speak of it?" he said to himself. "When the Daudiernes learn that Roger comes from the Duke de Bretteville, they won't remember that on the day before yesterday I mentioned him as one of the heirs who would be disinherited. If they do remember him they will perhaps think themselves obliged to condole with him in a manner which may embarrass him. They will probably talk of nothing but the ferry-boat accident,

and that will be very gloomy. I shan't say a single word about it. It is his own look out if he chooses to play the part of an afflicted cousin."

The mare was trotting along at an even pace, and they had already gone a long distance. "We are approaching La Germonière," remarked Pontac. "I can see the tops of the Bois-du-Tertre trees."

"You must have played about here in your childhood," said the doctor.

"Yes; I came every day to play in the park when the house was uninhabited. I could find my way about here even now with my eyes shut."

"Madame Daudierne purchased the grounds and château in 1871, but for three or four years she did not come here to live. Her daughters' education kept her in Paris."

"She has two daughters, I believe."

"Yes, and a son who is not like his sisters. He is by no means their equal in intelligence."

"Are they about the same age?" asked Roger, in order to make the doctor talk.

"The elder is over twenty-three years old; the younger, twenty and six months. You see that it is time they were married, the elder one especially."

"That will soon happen, you say."

"One is never sure about these things. It isn't enough to ask for the hand of a young lady of good family to get it. These young ladies have a right to be fastidious, Laurence especially; and their mother isn't a woman to insist upon their marrying."

Roger started at the name of Laurence, which was not the one that the echo of the Roche-de-Lémon had repeated. M. Subligny spoke in a way which seemed to indicate that his mission concerned the elder sister, the one whom it was time to marry off. Germaine must be the younger one. Roger was not certain, however; but it was now in his power to find out the truth without betraying his secret.

"Is Mademoiselle Laurence the younger one?" said he, timidly.

"No," replied the doctor. "She is the older of the two, and I think her more attractive than Germaine, who is three years younger than she is. Both of them are adorable young creatures, but Laurence will make a perfect wife."

"And her sister——?"

"Her sister has the germ of all the good qualities which make a happy home. The only thing is to develop such qualities, and that depends upon a woman's husband. If the man who marries Germaine knows how to win her affection, he will be the happiest fellow in the world. But if he doesn't know how to make her love him, I won't answer for the consequences. She is giddy, self-willed, and inclined to be romantic. She will be cured later on of those trifling defects, no doubt, but Laurence is already fitted for married life."

"I no longer doubt," thought Roger, completely comforted. "It is the elder girl who is about to become Madame du Pomméval."

"I don't know why I enter into all these details," resumed M. Subligny. "You are not a candidate for the hand of either of the demoiselles, and you don't think of marrying. You will wait till you are a captain to marry, and you will do well. It is better to remain single than marry badly, and a sub-lieutenant never marries well. When I think that when I left the Val-de-Grace Hospital with the grade of under-assistant to a surgeon, I came near marrying a laundress, I still shudder, even now."

Pontac laughed, but with effort. The doctor had just given him a cut which brought him suddenly back to realities.

"We are approaching the avenue," said Dr. Subligny, after a somewhat prolonged pause, "and here comes Baptiste, who looks as though he were taking a letter to the post-office; he will tell us what we want to know as he passes by."

"Is your mistress at home?" he called out to the old servant, who bowed respectfully to him.

"Madame Daudierne is in the garden with the young ladies. Monsieur Armand has taken his gun to go duck-shooting on the river. The young ladies are in the Periwinkle Walk."

"It is just as well," said the doctor to Roger, "the uncle would have been in the way. You can go and join him, after I have introduced you, and when you have paid your respects to the lady of the house; and you can keep him away while I acquit myself of the mission which has been confided to me."

The arrangement proposed by Monsieur Subligny was only partly pleasing to Roger, who cared a great deal less about inviting the uncle to Bretteville than about talking with the younger of the nieces. He was well aware that this interview would decide his fate. The meeting at the Roche-de-Lémon had only been a starting point. It was not likely that a well-bred young girl would have allowed her real feelings to be seen at a first meeting, and everything depended upon the manner in which Germaine received Lieutenant Pontac when he was properly introduced by a friend of the family. It was, however, necessary to put a good face on the matter, and alight with the doctor in front of the servants' out-houses, where the coachman who had seen them drive up the avenue was waiting to unharness the vehicle and take the mare to the stable.

"Madame Daudierne is in the garden with her daughters! That is all very well," grumbled the doctor; "but where the deuce am I to find the so-called 'Periwinkle Walk.'"

"I know where it is," said Roger, at once, "and I will take you there. You must, of course, begin by introducing me to Madame Daudierne."

"Certainly, and if Monsieur Armand has gone very far off to shoot, you can explain to his sister-in-law the motive of your visit. After that you will be at liberty to go or stay, and if you stay, you will find it very pleasant. The young ladies are most agreeable."

"I shall see what is best to do," muttered Roger.

The house built by the defunct druggist had been erected between court and garden, in the old fashion, but the new owner had torn down the wall of separation.

"Do you recognise it?" asked Dr. Subligny, when they had both reached the wide alley which extended in a straight line from the front door to the river.

"Perfectly," replied Roger, "I find the park just as I left it. Here on the left is the orangery, and further on the aviary. Here is the ornamental water with its wooden bridge leading to the kiosk with stained glass windows, and on the right are the groves."

"Yes, Madame Daudierne has had the good sense not to waste money in laying out her estate in the English style and placing artificial turf everywhere, and chalets after the style of the Champs-Élysées. There is nothing changed but ourselves, my lad! But let us take the shortest cut to the Periwinkle Walk."

"We have only to cross that grove of larches."

"They have grown since you were here—those larches. But the grotto is still where it was. The druggist believed in false grottoes and plaster statuary. See, here is a statue of Flora that has lost one arm, and a Faun tottering upon his pedestal."

Roger looked absently at the ivy-clad rocks and the statues green with moss. His thoughts were elsewhere. However, chance curtailed the sufferings of suspense, for at a turn of the shady path the doctor and the lieutenant espied Madame Daudierne coming towards them with one of her daughters, whom Pontac easily recognised in spite of her blue-flanne garden hood. Dr. Subligny at once recovered the agility of a young man and met the ladies half way, accosting them with the words:

"Good morning, madame. Good morning, Mademoiselle Germaine. You are surprised to see me at this hour, are you not? Once is not always you know. I have deserted my office to come to La Germonière, leaving my patients to do the best they can. I wish to introduce to you my young friend, Roger Pontac, an officer of hussars, whom I have not seen for a long time, and who is at present a country neighbour of yours, as he is staying at the Château de Bretteville, and is the bearer of an invitation from the duke for Monsieur Armand to shoot over his preserves."

"My brother-in-law will be extremely pleased to do so," stammered Madame Daudierne, who was greatly surprised. "He has not, however the honour of knowing Monsieur de Bretteville, and——"

"Monsieur de Bretteville heard, madame," said Roger, "that Monsieur Daudierne would like to shoot over the woods of La Bretèche, and asked me to——"

"Oh, sir," interrupted Germaine, "you cannot imagine how pleased my uncle will be. He thinks of nothing but the deer at La Bretèche. He dreams about them, and if you have brought him permission to shoot there——"

"As much as he pleases, mademoiselle; and the duke will place his gamekeepers and the men who beat up the woods at his service."

Roger had recovered his composure, now that he began to see his way. It was evident that Mademoiselle Daudierne had said nothing about their adventure, or, if she had spoken of it, she had been careful not to speak of the most important part of the trip to the fairies' rock, for her mother had shown no signs of recognising the name of Pontac when it was mentioned by Dr. Subligny. It was not, however, the first time that she had heard this name, so easy to remember, for the doctor had pronounced it when speaking of the Vignemal inheritance, but to all appearance it had passed entirely from her recollection.

To tell the truth, of all the inmates of La Germonière, Germaine alone remembered it; and Madame Daudierne was not aware that the Duke de Bretteville's ambassador was already known to her younger daughter. However, Germaine had not shown any embarrassment on seeing her admirer appear. It seemed as though she expected him. And this secrecy towards her mother seemed to Roger full of promise.

"My brother-in-law will be very sorry that he was not here to receive you, sir," said Madame Daudierne. "He has gone shooting some distance off, and I doubt whether he will return before the evening, but he will go to thank Monsieur de Bretteville and have the pleasure of seeing you at the same time."

"Meantime, my dear madame," began the doctor, who wished to

accomplish his purpose as soon as possible, "we should be sorry, my young friend and I, to interfere with your walk; I wish to see you about an important matter, but I think that we can discuss it in the open air. It is as mild as spring, and the interview which I solicit need not be long."

"As you please, doctor," said the lady, not without a glance at her daughter and the handsome officer who had, as it were, fallen from the clouds.

"Laurence will soon join us, I think," she said to Germaine, who at once replied: "She would be here already, mamma, if she had not amused herself with picking periwinkles. She has a passion for pressing flowers in scrap books. I hate it. Herbal collections are the cemeteries of flowers. But she walks faster than we do, and will be here in a few minutes."

"My dear doctor, I am at your orders," resumed Madame Daudierne, hurrying on so as to leave the young people behind. "This gentleman will kindly excuse me for a few moments, and Germaine will show him our magnolias. They are the finest in this part of the country, and I don't fancy there are any better ones in Paris, or even ones as large."

Pontac was only too glad to remain alone with Mademoiselle Daudierne, and he rejoiced in the absence of the elder sister. The uncle's absence, also, gave him an opportunity for a few private words, the mere thought of which made his heart beat fast.

"I knew that you would come," Germaine timidly said to him, with a smile of encouragement.

"You excuse me, then, mademoiselle," asked Roger, "for making use of a mere pretext?"

"I furnished you with the pretext myself, on the day before yesterday," was the reply. "It would hardly do for me to reproach you for having made use of it, but I was not certain that it would suit you to do so, and it is because I doubted it that I said nothing, here at home, about our meeting and our walk. Now that you have come, however, I have no longer the same reasons for remaining silent, and my mother shall know that you rescued me from a dangerous plight. As soon as she has done talking with the doctor, I will tell her all about my adventure. But I cannot imagine what the worthy doctor can have to say of so much importance."

"I think that I know what it is, mademoiselle," said Roger, timidly.

At this moment Monsieur Subligny, who always went straight to facts, opened the great question with a very short preamble. "Yes, dear madame," said he to Madame Daudierne, "it is very serious. Arthur du Pomméval came to see me this morning expressly to ask me to make his proposal for him. He might have chosen a better intermediary, for being a mere old bachelor I have little experience in such matters. Still I agreed to represent him, and I have the honour of being sufficiently intimate with you to hope for a candid reply, and that at once, for I cannot conceal from you that this fine young man wishes to become your son-in-law speedily."

"Too speedily," replied Madame Daudierne. "His uncle is not yet buried. The step which you have taken in his name is very flattering to me as a mother, but it seems to me to be rather premature."

"I don't say that it is not," rejoined the doctor, "but lovers leap over all social customs when they furnish obstacles, and Pomméval is madly in love."

"I saw that the last time that he came to La Germonière. He danced with my daughter all the evening."

"He would have declared himself a year ago if he had dared. But then he had but a small amount of money at his disposal. He is rich now, or will become so, at all events. And you will no doubt appreciate his eagerness to place his newly-found fortune at the feet of Mademoiselle Daudierne. His first thought was of her."

"I am willing to admit that he might have changed his mind on becoming a richer man," rejoined Madame Daudierne. "I am convinced, however, that his love is sincere, and that he is calculated to make my daughter happy; still, I must consult her before answering in her name."

"That is only proper, my dear madame, and the sooner the better, for I have no doubt but what the reply will be favourable."

However, Madame Daudierne was quite overcome, and Dr. Subligny now remained silent, to give her time to recover herself. Ten steps behind them another dialogue was going on. "The doctor confessed to you, then," replied Germaine, to what Roger had said, "that he had undertaken to make a proposal of marriage?"

"He did not confess it to me, for I did not question him," replied the young officer. "He told me about it of his own accord."

"Did he tell you whether it concerned my sister or me?"

"No, mademoiselle, and I did not like to ask him, for I was afraid that he might say it concerned you."

"If it did, it does not follow that I should accept the offer. I shall marry to please myself, I can promise you that. But did not Monsieur Subligny tell you the suitor's name?"

"No, mademoiselle. But I think that I have guessed it. The doctor received a visit this morning from Monsieur Arthur du Pomméval."

"Ah, good! Then it isn't my liberty that is threatened. Monsieur du Pomméval is very much smitten with Laurence, who, I think, likes him; and I shall be very much pleased with the match."

"I hope that you are not mistaken as to the object of Monsieur du Pomméval's choice," remarked Roger, timidly.

"I cannot be mistaken," rejoined Germaine. "In the first place, he has for some time been very marked in his manner towards my sister. Besides, she is the elder, and ought to be married before myself, a younger sister. The contrary would be ridiculous. Besides, you will see that as soon as Laurence appears the conversation on matrimonial matters will cease. The doctor will quietly rejoin us, and my mother will call Laurence to tell her of the honour done her by M. Arthur du Pomméval."

"Heaven hear you, mademoiselle!" said Roger.

While they were exchanging these remarks and conjectures in a low tone, Madame Daudierne resumed in a firmer tone: "You know me, dear doctor, and you know that I do not believe in marriages made against inclination. I married Monsieur Daudierne, who had no fortune, and I was very happy with him. I shall not try to influence my daughter in the least."

"You can at least advise her."

"Of course, but I shall leave her free to accept or reject Monsieur du Pomméval."

"I thought that such would be the case. Well, I only ask you to tell her to-day that the poor fellow is dying to know his fate."

"I will do so willingly, and as soon as Laurence overtakes us, which

she will do in a minute or two, I will ask her to tell me what she thinks of——”

“I beg your pardon, my dear madame,” interrupted Monsieur Subigny, “but I—I—do not understand. You speak about Mademoiselle Laurence.”

“Of course; I cannot decide anything without her.”

“Why not? I have come to solicit the hand of her sister Germaine for my young friend. It is not indispensable to know the views of Mademoiselle Laurence on the subject.”

“Germaine!” exclaimed Madame Daudierne, intensely surprised. “Is it Germaine that Monsieur du Pomméval wishes to marry?”

“Yes, my dear madame,” said the doctor, smiling. “I was wrong not to tell you so at the beginning of our conversation, but I did not think that you could mistake my friend’s intentions.”

“My mistake was quite natural,” retorted Madame Daudierne, still in a state of bewilderment. “Your friend openly paid attention to Laurence, who is aware of this herself. How could I guess that he was thinking of her sister?”

“He must have made a mistake, then,” said the doctor, “for he is wildly in love with Mademoiselle Germaine. That is just the way with lovers! They are always afraid of betraying their secret predilections, and to hide them they act a part which deceives others. But I’ll venture to say that Mademoiselle Germaine knows what to think about the matter.”

“I think, on the contrary, that she hasn’t the slightest idea that this young man is in love with her. He has paid her attention as he has paid attention to others, but he has certainly not declared himself. Germaine would have told me.”

“Perhaps she will tell it you if you mention to her the offer which I have made on my friend’s behalf.”

“I will do so at once. The situation in which my two daughters are now placed cannot be allowed to last.”

“Your two daughters? Ah! I understand. You mean that it will be painful to the elder to see her sister married first. That is true; but such things happen every day, and, besides, Mademoiselle Laurence will not lack suitors. She is charming, and I confess that if Monsieur du Pomméval had asked my opinion, I should have advised him to try and please her. But people in love never take anybody’s advice.”

“In love!” repeated Madame Daudierne. “Is he really as much in love with Germaine as he imagines?”

“No one could be more so. He doesn’t sleep, and he may die of grief, I fear, if I bring him back a refusal.”

“I did not think he had such an impassioned nature; he seemed only to care for display, horses, worldly life, and——”

“He was endeavouring to forget, for he had no hope of being accepted while he had no fortune. He is a different man now, and exclusively thinks of sharing his happiness with a wife.”

“Well, that is as it should be,” said Madame Daudierne, “and if Germaine accepts him, I shan’t interfere with their happiness. But Monsieur du Pomméval does not suppose, I presume, that my daughter will consent without thinking the matter over? She doesn’t know anything about him, although she has often seen him. She has seen his demeanour in society, but she has no knowledge of his character, and I am sure that she will not make up her mind till after a longer and closer acquaintance.”

"Oh! he will consent to any trial which she may insist upon. What he now asks is to be authorised to pay his attentions while waiting to obtain the consent of the woman he loves, and whom he hopes to lead to loving him. It would not be proper for him to marry until the term for his mourning is over. Mademoiselle Germaine will thus have ample time to become better acquainted with him."

"On those conditions, my dear doctor, I am ready to tell my younger daughter of the proposal which you have made in Monsieur du Pomméval's name. I will call her here. It isn't exactly the thing to leave her so long with the young man who came with you."

"Oh, as to that, he will not be a suitor, I promise you! He is an excellent young man, and he knows perfectly well that a "soldier of fortune," or rather a soldier without a fortune, cannot marry one of the Daudiernes. I am going to join him, and I will occupy his attention while the fate of Arthur du Pomméval is being decided. I see Mademoiselle Laurence coming along now; she will help me to show him the beauties of the park."

Meantime, Dr. Subligny had slackened his pace to let the young people overtake him, and Laurence approached the group now gathered in the centre of the walk, under the larch-trees. She held in her hand a bunch of periwinkles—the false violets of autumn—and she looked inquisitively at Roger Pontac, whom Dr. Subligny hastily introduced to her. Madame Daudierne now took Germaine's arm and led her away, while the doctor, in order to divert the attention of the hussar officer and the elder sister, exerted himself to make them admire the gigantic magnolias, the fame of which extended twenty miles around.

"My dear child, I have a great piece of news to tell you," said the lady of La Germonière in her daughter's ear.

"My dear mother, I think that I have guessed it, this great piece of news," replied Germaine, gayly. "The dear doctor has put on a pair of kid gloves and a dress-coat. His attire looks as though he had come to make a proposal of marriage."

"You must have second sight. Monsieur Subligny has come from——"

"Monsieur Arthur du Pomméval."

"Exactly."

"To ask you for the hand of Mademoiselle Laurence Daudierne."

"No, for yours."

"That's impossible!" exclaimed Germaine, sincerely surprised. "The doctor must have misunderstood him. It is Laurence that Monsieur du Pomméval wishes to marry. He has been in love with her for three years past, and the last time that he spent the evening here he did not take the trouble to conceal his feelings. He had eyes—and waltzes for my dear sister only."

"You must have seen wrong, or misinterpreted his conduct," said Madame Daudierne. "Monsieur Subligny explained himself very clearly, and he is waiting for your answer to give it to his young friend. It depends upon you alone to become Madame du Pomméval."

"What! right off? suddenly, like that? I don't love this fine millionaire, and all that I know about him is that he waltzes well."

"But you don't dislike him?"

"No, but I think that Laurence likes him better than I do. Why does he wish to marry me? Young ladies ought to marry according to their age. It isn't my turn yet," urged Germaine.

"Don't talk foolishly, my dear girl, but listen to me. You need not engage yourself positively, as yet. Monsieur du Pomméval merely solicits permission to pay his attentions to you, and to visit La Germonière frequently.

"But he comes now whenever he wishes; he is here all the time. He has had plenty of chances to declare himself. What an idea to send someone else to make proposals for him! He must be very timid if he needs your permission to tell me what he thinks of me and what he wishes. I don't know whether he adores me, as he says, but I think that he has a strange way of making it apparent."

"Think a moment, my dear Germaine. Things are always managed in this way in the society in which we move. You would be the first person to be seriously offended if a young man offered you his heart while he was dancing a quadrille with you. Monsieur du Pomméval conforms to custom, which requires that the parents of a young girl should be consulted first."

"But the young girl ought to have some idea that she is going to be asked for, and I did not expect this in the least. I thought that Monsieur du Pomméval was in love with Laurence, and as she is not in the least like me, I couldn't suppose that he would pass so quickly from the brunette to the blonde, from the wise to the foolish. In a word, I am not prepared to give him an answer."

"But I must give an answer for you, my dear. Would you be annoyed if I encouraged Monsieur du Pomméval's hopes?" asked Madame Daudierne.

"*Encourage* is too much to say. It is enough to let him continue his visits," rejoined Germaine in a tone of decision.

"You do not reject his offer, then?"

"I retain my freedom of action."

"You know very well that I don't wish to deprive you of it. Let me say to you, however, that this young man is very wealthy——"

"Much too wealthy for me."

"That the magnificent estate that he has inherited adjoins our estate here, which we are so fond of."

"The vicinity of the property has nothing to do with the matter."

"And, in a word, the marriage would place you at the head of society in a part of the country where we pass several months every year."

"I should dazzle the inhabitants of Arcy, no doubt, but——"

"As for the personal qualifications of Monsieur du Pomméval," resumed Madame Daudierne, imperturbable despite all her daughter's interruptions, "it is for you, you alone, to judge of them, and, to my mind, you cannot do that better than by giving him an opportunity to display his merits. All that I ask is that you won't hastily reject an offer which you may later on regret having refused."

Madame Daudierne had followed a wise course of reasoning, and her moderation triumphed over Germaine's objections.

"Well, then, I don't refuse," said the young girl, after a short pause, "but I wish to make my conditions."

"If they are such as can be accepted, you may do so."

"The first," resumed Germaine, "is, that our relations with Monsieur du Pomméval shall not be changed. He may come just as he did—oftener if he likes—and may besiege my heart as he may see fit to do. I don't promise to yield it to him, but I shall not make up my mind against him. It is for him to conquer me, and if he really loves me I suppose that he

will succeed, for it seems to me that love must be catching. But if, by chance," added Germaine, with a burst of laughter, "he finds out that it is really Laurence that he loves, I shan't be angry with him."

"You can never be serious! However, I shall take your words just as you say them, and transmit your answer to Monsieur Subligny. Let us go towards him."

They did so. The two groups met, whereupon Madame Daudierne took the doctor's arm, and said to him in a whisper: "You didn't think that Germaine would consent at once, nor did I. She wishes for time to reflect, but she will be pleased if Monsieur du Pomméval continues to visit La Germonière."

"That is all that can be hoped for at present," replied the doctor, "and I am anxious to tell him at once that my embassy has proved successful. So I will take leave of you now, and take away my young officer, who would be in your way. You must wish to talk the matter over with Monsieur Armand and the young ladies."

"Yes, I wish to consult my brother-in-law, and I cannot conceal from my eldest daughter that Monsieur du Pomméval asks for her sister's hand."

Laurence came up just as her mother was speaking of her. "Can you tell me, dear doctor," said the jilted young lady, "why the gentlemen from Arcy don't come to see us? No one has been here for three days past."

While M. Subligny was lengthily explaining the reasons why the recent mourning of the most fashionable of the young men she alluded to kept him from appearing at dancing parties, Germaine was saying to Roger Pontac: "I have changed my mind. I shall never tell my mother about our meeting at the foot of the Roche-de-Lémon."

"I know why you have changed your mind, mademoiselle," said Roger, sadly, "and I think with you, that all that remains to me is to endeavour to forget you."

"So you have guessed that Monsieur du Pomméval has just proposed for my hand," replied Germaine, quickly; "but, come, you cannot know what I have replied, and I must tell you. I have replied that I would decide later on, and that in the meantime I would receive Monsieur du Pomméval on the same footing as before."

"Is it not the same thing as to promise to accept him?"

"He will perhaps think so; but what does that matter? I have a motive for keeping our doors open to him, and that motive I will tell you, if you promise to keep what I say secret."

"Do you doubt my discretion?" asked Roger.

"No," said Germaine promptly; "and the proof of it is that I will tell you my secret. I am sure that my sister loves Monsieur du Pomméval, and I want him to marry her."

"But he does not love her, and he does love you."

"He imagines so; but I undertake to prove to him that he is mistaken. You see that I am not afraid of anything. And now that you know my plans, I think that we shall see one another again. When my uncle goes to thank Monsieur de Bretteville he will not fail to invite you to La Germonière. It is idle for you to wait for him to-day, for he won't come home till to-night."

Roger, pale with emotion and with joy, was trying to think what reply he ought to make to Germaine's words, when the doctor came up to him and said: "My dear friend, it is already growing late, and I am expected

at Arcy. You have delivered your message, and I will drive you to the first turn on the road to Bretteville."

"I trust, sir, that we shall soon see you again," said Madame Daudierne, kindly, to Roger. "My brother-in-law will call upon you."

Under any other circumstances the worthy lady would not have allowed a visitor to depart without asking him to rest awhile in the drawing-room, but Dr. Subligny's mission had disturbed her so much that she neglected a hostess's first law of politeness.

No one, besides, cared to prolong this interview in the open air. Germaine had succeeded in saying what she wished to say. Laurence, who suspected that Dr. Subligny and her mother had spoken about her, wished to clear up her doubts. The doctor was anxious to carry the good news to his friend the suitor, and Roger longed to be alone and try to calm the tumult in his mind.

The poor lieutenant carried away a hope with him, and yet he did not dare to think that Germaine Daudierne would perhaps spurn the millions of Arthur du Pomméval for the sword and buckler of Madame Vignemal's disinherited cousin. The future had strange surprises in store for all the actors in the drama, of which the first scene had been enacted at the Beuvron ferry.

IV

SOCIALLY speaking, the human species is subdivided into several categories, each of which has its peculiar manners and customs, tastes and instincts.

In France there are cultured and uncultured people; there are provincials and Parisians, without counting many other categories which differ essentially from each other. The man who has spent his life on the Paris boulevards has more resemblance to a Russian than to the citizen of a petty town.

Arthur du Pomméval belonged to a species which tends to disappear, for he had the pretension to be the beau of Arcy and also to cut a figure in Paris, where he spent six months of the year.

As a general rule, the young men from the country who wish to shine in the French capital speedily come to grief in one way or another. Some dash boldly and without restraint into the vast furnace of Paris, where the fortune left them by their fathers melts away like wax. Indeed, almost all of them singe their wings, though there are some who end by obtaining a foothold upon the slippery pavement of the boulevard and having a permanent place there. These young fellows, at the end of a few years, acquire a taste for the gay city, become even more Parisian than the Parisians themselves, and remain Parisians for ever.

Others, and they are by far the greater number, speedily find out that they can never grow accustomed to being confounded with the crowd, and hark back to the easier and less expensive triumphs which are obtainable in the little towns where they were born. They are content with astonishing their fellow-citizens by follies which never go beyond a certain point, and by a display of luxury which is barely ruinous. Then, when the proper moment arrives, they marry and resign themselves without much difficulty to passing their existence in swallowing dinners of twelve courses, and indulging in whist at half a franc a point, and in shooting parties at which it is necessary to walk six hours to

kill a partridge. There are some who go so far as to spend their evenings at the *Café du Commerce*, in the company of commission-agents and petty clerks.

Arthur du Pomméval had not come to this, and he hoped never to do so. He did not renounce the idea of being the leader of fashion at Arcy, but he greatly wished to keep up his acquaintance in Paris. He had inherited from his father a marked tendency to rise above his position, and attain a good social standing. The author of his being had indeed formerly been most pretentious—aiming at being thought a nobleman, and at shining in that curious cosmopolitan circle which the Parisians call the sphere of high life. It had, indeed, cost him half his fortune to shine in Paris and set himself on intimate terms with the country squires of his province. But Arthur had also inherited from his mother, who was Monsieur Vignemal's sister, certain qualities which are essentially those of country people—namely, economy and forethought. Left an orphan at fifteen, and free to do as he pleased at eighteen, he had begun by playing at ducks and drakes with his money ; driving a four-in-hand through the Arcy streets in the summer, and invariably displaying himself at the first performances of the Paris theatres. However, his intention had always been to profit of the first good opportunity of marrying advantageously. The chance had not yet offered itself, and his fortune had begun to dwindle, when Madame Daudierne decided to pass every summer at La Germonière with her daughters.

Arthur du Pomméval then concluded that he might, perhaps, find what he had been on the look out for. The two girls were charming and very well bred. The mother was believed to be very wealthy, and uncle Armand, also rich, did not appear likely to disinherit his nieces. For a young man who had eaten into his income already, either of the young ladies would be a fine match, and Pomméval began to lay his plans accordingly. He saw them on frequent occasions during their stay in the country, and in Paris he obtained invitations from the families at whose houses they visited. His first approaches did not advance matters much. He was politely received, but failed to become intimate. It was only when Armand Daudierne visited his sister-in-law's château that the enterprising Arthur began to make favourable progress. The young lover pleased the old bachelor, who was on the look out for some gay young people with whom he might while away the hours during his stay in the country. And M. du Pomméval, invited once for all, attained a footing which enabled him to call almost every day at La Germonière, and was at last able to attempt serious advances.

He was not wanting in wit or tact, and he took good care not to show himself at once in the character of a possible suitor. He felt that he must first gain the confidence of Madame Daudierne and secure uncle Armand's support, as the latter had a voice in the matter ; then cautiously endeavour to please both of the sisters, try to find out which of them would be likely to accept him as a lover, and finally declare himself. He admired them both, and was at a loss about making a choice. It must be said that at the outset of his amorous campaign he was not in a position to choose. Even the less attractive of these two young girls would have done him great honour in consenting to marry him, and before knowing them better, it was very difficult to decide which of the two had the greater attractions. They were equally handsome, although Germaine was perhaps the more lively and entertaining.

Now, as the marriage to which Arthur du Pomméval aspired could not be aught than a marriage of inclination, as these young ladies were likely to find richer and nobler husbands than he in Paris, it was above all requisite to inspire one or the other of them with a feeling strong enough to lead her to overlook any objections to an alliance with a young man possessing but a small fortune. Pomméval, therefore, carefully refrained from showing any preference, and only thought of making the most of the advantages with which nature had endowed him. He was handsome, distinguished in manner and appearance, and he danced extremely well, besides knowing how to converse with ladies, which is a rare and precious gift. He was not destitute of vanity, but he concealed it, and although he was of a practical nature, he was quite capable of yielding to the impulses of his heart. His good qualities, in a word, overbalanced his defects.

With so many advantages, and that worldly knowledge which is acquired in society, he could not fail to succeed at La Germonière, and he did succeed. But the complicated plan which he had devised resulted differently to what he had foreseen. Laurence had fallen in love with him, and he had fallen in love with Germaine, who did not love him. His prudent calculations had turned against himself, and he was well punished for having hesitated instead of speaking openly.

Love is a passion which is inconsistent with compromise and delay. Love has nothing in common with expediency, and it revenges itself upon those who try to fetter it, or reconcile it with mere interest. Thus Arthur du Pomméval's clever plans resulted only in placing him between two trying alternatives. He must either renounce a young girl whom he adored, and marry one who but partially pleased him, or he must not marry either of them, for he saw very clearly that it was thought desirable to marry off Mademoiselle Laurence Daudierne before her sister, and that the rules which habitually govern such matters would not be set aside to please him.

Any other man would have thought himself defeated, and would have retired from the field, but Arthur du Pomméval had the courage to remain and hide his feelings, in order to take future measures. He had paid Mademoiselle Laurence great attention without ceasing to be attentive to her sister also. Laurence had been deceived by this, but Germaine had understood it. She had guessed that the perpetual suitor was keeping a chance open for himself, and that later on he would propose for herself or her sister,—in fact, the one that he thought himself most likely to get. Matters were in this position when the accident to the ferry-boat made Monsieur Vignemal's nephew a millionaire, and the justice must be done him to say that he did not for a moment think of taking his love or his new fortune elsewhere, although he could now aspire to marry a much richer girl.

However, he decided that there was no longer anything in the way of his preferences for Germaine. In the strictest families of the upper middle class no one refuses to allow the younger daughter to marry first when an "exceptional occasion" offers—to use a term which figures so frequently in the advertisements of Parisian linen-drapers, and which may also be applied to certain conjugal affairs. In acting thus, Pomméval had not broken any vow. He had allowed Laurence to believe that he aspired to her hand, but he had taken good care not to pledge himself by any such words as escape a man when his love is sincere, and which amount to a promise.

In perfect good faith, he believed himself to be still free, and he thought it quite natural that he should follow his inclinations, now that he was "able to do so," as the trite phrase goes. The provincial leaven in his nature rose uppermost, and the lessons of his departed mother bore their fruit. She had taught him from childhood upwards that money is the monarch of the world, and that everything is possible to the wealthy. He sincerely pitied Laurence, whom he was jilting, and he felt certain that he should succeed in pleasing Germaine, who did not yet love him, but who would certainly love him soon, for she could not fail to be flattered at seeing the king of all the "gilded youth" of Arcy place his heart and fortune at her feet.

He even thought himself very chivalrous and generous in acting thus, and, assuredly, if he had not been in love he would not have returned to La Germonière. He would have gone to reside in Paris, where society throws its doors wide open to all the wealthy heirs in search of wives. But as he was in love he had lost no time in making his declaration, despatching Dr. Subligny as his ambassador on the second day after his uncle's death. The doctor had brought him back an encouraging answer, but at the same time he had not concealed from him the judge's opinion as to the claims of Monsieur and Madame Vignemal's relatives one and all.

The so-called presumption of survival was not applicable in the present case, and it was Du Pomméval's business to prove that his uncle had died the last; if this could not be done, Madame Vignemal's will was null and void, and her fortune passed entirely to the heirs-at-law.

This was a thunderbolt for poor Arthur. Dr. Subligny vainly told him that the judge thought that he would be likely to gain his suit, so that he, Jean Subligny, ex-army surgeon and a knight of the Legion of Honour, had not thought it necessary to defer filling his mission to Madame Daudierne. He vainly added that he himself personally undertook to prove by medical demonstration that the wife had not survived the husband. Nothing did any good, and Arthur, robbed of his illusions, felt profoundly discouraged.

Four days had gone by, and he had not yet rallied from this blow, which was the harder to bear as the news of the change in the aspect of matters had not yet spread through Arcy. The doctor had kept the secret, and in following the bodies of the deceased Vignemals to the grave, where they were laid side by side in the cemetery of the village, Pomméval had noticed the looks of hatred directed towards him by the cousins, who fancied that he had got the better of them. He was treated everywhere as the heir, and he did not dare confide the real facts to any one.

Just as murder will out, so will the truth assert itself, and in the present case it was soon to be known. The poor relations of Madame Vignemal were not people to give up their cousin's money without consulting a lawyer, and lawyers do not make mistakes in explaining the meaning of three clauses of the Civil Code. Such errors are pardonable only in people belonging to society, and in physicians who have not studied law—like Dr. Subligny, for instance.

So it was time for Pomméval to come to some determination, and to decide on what footing he should present himself at La Germonière. He had not shown himself there since the doctor had told him that he was authorised to call as often as he chose. The death and burial of the victims of the ferry-boat accident excused this short delay, but the time

had come for him to show himself at the Daudierne's, and to leave his house, where he had remained in some measure out of respect for the dead, and especially in order to avoid hearing bad news. It was absolutely necessary for him to re-appear in the streets of Arcy, to face the questions of the inquisitive townsfolk, or let it be thought that he had given up the inheritance. He would sin grievously against propriety if he delayed going to thank Madame Daudierne at her own house, beginning the trial required of him by Germaine, warding off Laurence's resentment, and, worse than all, talking over business matters with uncle Armand, who would not fail to ask him why he delayed taking possession of the Vignemal property.

What should he say in answer to that? To speak falsely was repugnant to Pomméval, and, besides, the truth must be soon made known. The doctor was not there to be consulted. He had been called away by one of his regular patients, who happened to be in Paris by chance, and Pomméval, after a great deal of hesitation, decided to ask the presiding judge of the Arcy tribunal what he thought of his cause.

The proceeding was a delicate one, for the judge was very justly thought to be a magistrate sincerely attached to his professional duties, and altogether incorruptible. Besides, he had no great esteem for the handsome Arthur, who was thought to be a spendthrift, and who had certainly been leading a gay life. But, on the other hand, M. Lestrigon had been somewhat intimate with M. du Pomméval, Arthur's father, and he could not refuse to advise the son. Besides, according to Dr. Subligny, he was well disposed toward M. Vignemal's heir, and he had even let fall that the suit would most likely result in his favour.

Pomméval had too much tact to take any advantage of the confidential remarks which the doctor ought not to have repeated to him, and he meant to take care not to allude to them in talking with the judge; but nothing prevented him from speaking of his painful situation to an old friend of his father, or from asking him to tell him how to proceed in this peculiar case. Arthur's resolution was taken, and his purpose being clear, he now made his coachman harness the brougham, which he only used on important occasions, and prepare to start for La Germonière. There he must do whatever the judge might suggest, unless he wished to be thought rude. And even though his case failed before the court, Arthur did not despair of retaining the good graces of the Daudierne family. At the point he had reached frankness would be skill. His idea was to tell everything, to openly confess that the inheritance of the Vignemals was about to escape him, and then, the avowal once made, to indulge in sentimental variations upon this easily-managed idea: "When I thought that I was about to be wealthy, my first impulse was to ask for the hand of Mademoiselle Germaine, to which I did not dare aspire when I was poor. I now learn that I have been deceived, that the law is against me, and so I shall remain as I am. It is my duty to tell you what is going on, and to withdraw my proposals without availing myself of the privilege which you have so graciously granted me. It costs me a great deal to renounce my fondest hopes, but honour obliges me to speak out."

Arthur was too well aware what kind of women Madame Daudierne and her daughter were to doubt their answer to such words as these. He knew that they would not be willing to show less generosity than he did, and that the doors of the château would not be closed against him. This was all he asked for the time being. It was for him to profit by the situa-

tion, and he might easily believe that his discreet and disinterested conduct would win him Germaine's sympathy at once. The romantic touch which pleases young girls had been wanting in Pomméval as the heir to a large fortune; but misfortune now gave it to him.

The Arcy Tribunal did not sit that day, and when M. Lestrignon, the presiding judge, was not in court he was almost always to be found at his own house; but he lived at the other side of the town, which Pomméval must traverse from one end to the other to see him. He could have gone in a carriage, but his visit would then have been remarked, for at Arcy a carriage stopping before a house is quite an event. It was better, therefore, to go on foot, even at the risk of being stopped by bores and inquisitive inquirers.

Having instructed his coachman to have the brougham in readiness to convey him to La Germonière after his return home, Arthur, duly attired in deep mourning, set forth along the side streets for the unfrequented quarter where M. Lestrignon resided. The heir, about whom everybody was talking ever since the accident on the Beuvron, relied upon being able to avoid any unpleasant encounter on his way. There was but one spot where he was likely to come across anybody whom he wished to avoid, and this was the Rue Nationale, which he was forced to cross, near the club; however, Pomméval hoped to effect this unnoticed. He walked on rapidly, and soon came to the centre of the town, near the high street, which was the idlers' habitual meeting-place. By chance there was no one lounging about there that day, and the balcony of the club-house was unoccupied when Pomméval came in sight of it.

However, just as he had set his feet on the sidewalk, a voice from above called him by name. He looked up, and, at a window on the first floor, he espied young Alfred Daudierne making signs to him to come up into the club. Pomméval, in his present state of mind, would have gladly avoided meeting Germaine's brother. He had not seen him for several days; Alfred had left for Paris several hours before the sad accident which had troubled the repose of the inmates of La Germonière, and he had not been expected back so soon, for whenever he was allowed to repair to the capital he never needed excuses for staying there as long as possible.

"What good luck to light on you here!" he cried, opening the window. "I was asking myself whether I had better go to see you before I returned to my mother's house. Here you are, however—and that decides me to remain away till to-morrow morning. Come up stairs, my dear friend!"

"It is impossible just now," replied Pomméval; "I am going to pay a call."

"A call! What! do you believe in making calls; you, a real swell of the Boulevard! I don't. However, if you really have to call on any one, you can do so by and by."

"No, no," responded Pomméval, promptly. "I am expected, and there is an important matter on hand."

"I want to talk to you about an important matter, too."

"Can't you come down, then? I had rather not be seen at the club."

"Come down? Oh, no!" said young Daudierne. "My uncle might pass by. In that case, he would begin to fire away at me like blazes. Besides, we couldn't talk in peace in the streets."

"Nor can we up there. We should be disturbed every moment."

"You make a mistake there, my dear fellow. There isn't as much as

a cat here—there are only two or three old fogies who are pretending to read the papers, that's all. Come up stairs, I beg of you !”

“No, I really cannot; it wouldn't be proper. I am in deep mourning,” urged Pomméval, who was rather perplexed as to his proper course of action.

“Oh, yes, I know all about it. Uncle Vignemal has kicked the bucket, and aunt Vignemal too. I just heard so, and you have come in for a pretty pile, which you didn't count upon. You are a lucky fellow, and no mistake. Such a thing would never happen to me, although I ought to inherit a fortune to set me right again. In the name of your millions, my dear Pomméval, I abjure you to come up ! I have a favour to ask of you, a very great favour indeed.

Pomméval mentally sent young Daudierne and his persistence to nameless regions ; but he did not wish to lose a chance of ingratiating himself with Germaine's brother, and he thought that, after all, he should get rid of him in ten minutes' time. “There is nothing that I would not do to oblige you,” he said, “and if you wish to ask a favour of me I am yours.”

After giving this reply in a tolerably low key—he was forced to give it by his position as suitor—Pomméval slipped into the dark passage serving as a vestibule for the club, which the old fogies of Arcy persisted in calling the “Literary Rooms,” although literature was seldom mentioned there. This club but slightly reminded one of the palatial ones of Paris. There were no liveried lackeys about, and the furniture was extremely plain. Five wainscoted rooms, a fair number of ordinary cane-bottom chairs, and a dozen arm-chairs, some card-tables with worn covers of green baize, and a billiard-table which had been bought at the failure of a local café—this was all. Still, the rooms were greatly frequented, and the best people of Arcy were glad to go there, just as a young man of good family who is entering fashionable society likes to be admitted to the “Jockey,” and not everybody, by the way, was admitted to the Arcy Club.

However, it was not the hour at which the young blood of the town went there to learn the mysteries of baccarat. All games of chance were played with closed doors, when the old fogies were safe in bed. At that moment the only people present were highly respectable old gentlemen, state functionaries, or men “living on their income,” as they say in the provinces, some of them quietly playing whist, and the others nodding over the morning papers which had just arrived from Paris. The appearance of Arthur du Pomméval thus passed almost unperceived, and Alfred, who had gone to meet him at the door, succeeded in drawing him, unnoticed, into the billiard-room, where they found themselves alone.

“I didn't know that you had returned,” said Pomméval. “When did you arrive ?”

“To-day, at half-past twelve, my dear friend,” replied young Alfred. “I was jostled for five hours in a railway carriage, and, as I did not sleep at all, I now feel as though I should drop down with fatigue.”

“You have not seen your mother, then ?”

“No ; and I am in no hurry to rouse our friends at La Germonière. The welcome that awaits me won't be so very agreeable. I'm sure of it. I even thought of hiring a room here in the town to tide over the storm which hangs above my head. My mother and my uncle will both fall upon me and scold me as hard as they can when they learn what's up, and my sister Laurence is likely enough to join in ; not Germaine, though, for she knows what life is.”

"Would it be indiscreet to ask what crime you have committed?" said Pomméval, smiling.

"Indiscreet? No, indeed! It was to tell you all about it that I called you up here. My dear fellow, I was foolish enough to play cards at a gambling house in Paris, where I have been going ever since last winter, and I have had one of those clearings-out which make a fellow wince when he's yet not of age. In the first place, the money that little Pauline of the Folies theatre gave me to stake for her was all lost, and, what is worse, I owe a hundred and fifty napoleons to the 'bank,'—a hundred and fifty napoleons which I must pay at once, unless I wish to be shown the door."

"That would be no misfortune."

"No; but it would get about, and if my uncle, who goes everywhere, heard of it——"

"He would pull you through, I am sure of it."

"He!" exclaimed Alfred, "it's easy to see that you don't know him. He has very sharp sayings that cut like razors. He would favour me with one of them, and that would be all. I can hear him now: "My lad, you are going to disgrace yourself. If I paid this debt you would incur another just like it. So you may as well disgrace yourself at once and have done with it. It will be less expensive, and you won't begin again.'"

"Oh! I'm sure that Monsieur Daudierne would give way a little under these circumstances," said Pomméval.

"He doesn't care for 'circumstances,'" replied Alfred, "and he would knock one down like a nine-pin. My mother would be easier to deal with, but she would begin to cry, and I can't stand that. Ah, if Germaine had money enough she'd lend it me, but I am sure that she hasn't got sixty napoleons of her own. And, in one word, my dear friend, I have nobody to apply to but you to get me out of this mess."

Pomméval expected this conclusion, which was far from delighting him. The sum was a large one, and in the present state of his finances it was hard to part with it. On the other hand, he knew that a refusal would lead to a quarrel between himself and young Alfred, and he did not care to have any enemy at La Germonière.

"I am doing a foolish thing," resumed Alfred, somewhat out of countenance, as he witnessed the small amount of eagerness displayed by Pomméval in obliging him. "A man ought never to borrow from a friend, I know that; and I beg you to believe that if I were of age I would go to a money-lender, but my signature isn't worth anything as yet; and I thought that the amount would not inconvenience you for a few months. Say four thousand francs in all, so that I may not be without a copper when I have settled up."

"I will lend them to you with pleasure," said Pomméval, who had now made up his mind, and formed a plan, suggested by this request for a loan.

"Thank you, my dear friend!" exclaimed young Daudierne, grasping his hand warmly. "I knew that you were an excellent fellow, and that I could rely upon you. Ah! if I should be consulted at La Germonière, I need not tell you what I should say. We are intimate enough for me to speak openly to you, and I declare to you that if you ever think of coming into the family I shall be delighted to have you for a brother-in-law."

This was plain speaking with a vengeance, and Pomméval had not

guessed that Alfred, in his gratitude, would go so far as to offer him his assistance to make his mother look upon him as a desirable suitor for one of the girls.

"I seem to be throwing my sisters at your head," added the giddy-headed youth of nineteen, "but I know who I'm talking to, and I can see what's going on. I may as well tell you that I have guessed your feelings."

"If you had been to La Germonière before coming to Arcy," replied Pomméval, gravely, "you would have learned, my dear Alfred, that last Thursday Dr. Subligny went, in my name, to ask for the hand of Madame Daudierne's daughter."

"Indeed! Well, I am delighted, and Laurence must be even more pleased than I am, for I don't mind telling you now that——"

"I asked for the hand of Mademoiselle Germaine," interrupted Pomméval.

"Ah! you don't say so! that's strange, now," exclaimed Alfred. "I imagined that—but never mind, I hope that they said: 'You can have her.'"

"We have not got so far as that yet," replied the handsome Arthur. "Mademoiselle Germaine has done me the honour not to reject me—she will allow me to call every day at La Germonière."

"Good! that is in the usual course of things. People must know one another before they marry—but just as if you didn't know each other now! Never mind! You can get married after Lent. If my little sister didn't like you she would not let you pay attention to her. My mother would go back to Paris to cut the matter short, while, as it is, here we shall most likely stay till New-Year's day. That is a nuisance so far as I'm privately concerned; but I give in as you are going to marry Germaine; and I don't pity her or you either. She's good, charming, and she has every virtue. As for you, my dear fellow, I don't wish to swing incense under your very nose, and, besides, you know what I think of you. And now, above and beyond all that, here you are a millionaire!"

"I am not one yet."

"It's the same thing. Daddy Sourdas, who pretends to be asleep over there, was just telling me how you are situated. He plays whist like a whale, that old fellow; but he has stumbled through the Civil Code. I can tell you all about it; and it appears that by virtue of—I don't know what clause—your uncle is supposed to have survived his wife."

"Monsieur Sourdas is mistaken, my dear fellow, and others have been deceived like him. I, myself, first of all. But I know better now, and if I had been aware of the truth before, I should not have ventured to ask for the hand of Mademoiselle Germaine. The step is taken, to my great regret, for Madame Daudierne will perhaps accuse me of not having told the truth as to the situation."

"What! Don't you inherit this money, then?" asked Alfred. "Come, that's impossible. There is the law."

"The law doesn't uphold me. I shall inherit the property if I can prove that Madame Vignemal died before her husband; but——"

"Oh! you can prove that."

"It will be very difficult. Only one man was there when the accident happened. He saw both persons disappear at the same moment when the boat was upset, and a few minutes afterwards he found Madame Vignemal. She had been thrown ashore on the outskirts of your park. She

appeared to be dead ; but my uncle's body was not found till the next day, and then very far from the spot where the ferry-boat was last seen. You see that the circumstances of the case are against me."

"I see nothing of the kind. Your uncle may have been able to swim for an hour, and have only sunk when his strength gave out."

"I don't think that he knew how to swim," remarked Pomméval, shaking his head ; "and even if he did, that proves nothing. There ought to be a witness, I tell you—a reliable witness, who would prove before the court that he saw Monsieur Vignemal holding himself up in the water long after the boat sank, and that he heard him calling out for help."

"The deuce ! What a number of things to prove," cried young Alfred Daudierne.

"So long as there is no such witness I shall be obliged to remain in distressing uncertainty—not on my own account, for I should resign myself without difficulty to remaining as I am ; but I cannot bear the idea of having unwillingly deceived Madame Daudierne." And Pomméval, as he spoke, looked a perfect picture of contrition."

"Wait a moment, my dear fellow," said young Alfred, putting his hand to his head. "I vaguely remember a conversation which I heard, and if the details of the accident coincide with what was said in my presence, I will furnish your witness for you."

"Are you speaking seriously ?" asked Pomméval, who did not lay much weight on young Daudierne's testimony.

"Do you take me for an idiot ?" cried Alfred, half indignantly. "I have been fleeced at baccarat, that is true ; but I should be the greatest fool in the world if I trifled when the interests of a friend who is about to become my brother-in-law are at stake ; and I repeat to you, my dear fellow, that chance has given me some information which will enable you to win your suit."

"I am delighted to hear it," said Arthur, "but I cannot get over my astonishment. You have been away for several days, and this morning, when you returned to Arcy, you did not even know that my uncle and his wife had been drowned."

"That's true. I learned the news at the club, and I am very sorry that I did not know it before, for if I had, there would be nothing wanting in the story that I am about to tell you. But, in the first place, I must ask you for some particulars as to the accident. I should not like to mislead you, and I need to know something respecting certain points, so as to make sure whether the story which I heard relates to your matter. It was last Tuesday, was it not, that the Vignemals fell into the water when they were crossing the Beuvron ferry ?"

"Yes, on Tuesday, at about nine in the evening. Your mother and Monsieur Armand Daudierne, your uncle, could tell to within a few minutes at what precise time it happened. They were in the drawing-room at La Germonière, and heard a cry at the moment when the accident occurred."

"Very good ! Now, when were the bodies found ?" asked Alfred, trying to assume the demeanour of an investigating magistrate.

"They were found on the following day, in the afternoon. Madame Vignemal's was on the right bank, a mile down the stream past the railing of your park. I told you before that the corpse was stranded the first time under the tamarisk walk, and that, being drawn along by the current again, it disappeared."

"That is of no consequence. I wish to know where the husband's body went," said Alfred, who did not lose sight of his main point.

"It was stranded upon the left shore, but much lower down; in fact, not far from the bridge known as Pont-aux-Mouettes," replied Pomméval.

"That's all right, then. Where was the boat found?"

"Only pieces of it were recovered. It must have gone down the river between two currents, and have dashed against a pillar of the bridge, for it was fished up under the first arch. The violence of the rise had created an eddy which held the wreck fast."

"Better and better! Now, my dear friend, I know all that is necessary to decide the case. Your matter is all settled; that is to say, the inheritance is yours."

"You would oblige me very much if you would explain yourself more clearly," said Pomméval.

"Willingly. This is what happened to me, only this morning, in the train. I was in a first-class carriage, and thought that I should be able to sleep, as there was no one left there but me. But no such thing. I had hardly laid down on the cushions when a perfect Punch made his appearance, with a long, peaked chin, a vulture-like nose, and gold spectacles. This grotesque creature got into the carriage and took the opposite corner. I was already in a rage, and this was not half that happened to annoy me. A minute or two afterwards, at the next station, along comes another of the same sort, who sat down in front of the first fellow. This new passenger was a little old man, who looked exactly like a country bailiff or a village pawnbroker. I was furious. I lit a big cigar without asking their permission to smoke, and I hoped that they would change compartments. Not at all! The little old man sneezed; Punch looked daggers at me over his spectacles; but they held out, both of them, and the train went on its way."

"Your adventure is amusing; but I am on thorns, and you would do me a favour if you would shorten it a little."

"I am coming to the end, and you won't lose anything by waiting. I had finished my cigar, and was trying to sleep when these two animals began to talk. Observe that they were not acquainted with each other, and they exchanged the most utterly commonplace remarks. I had a great mind to begin singing the air: 'So much the worse for her!' in the hope of silencing them. However, at last the man with the spectacles asked his opposite neighbour if he knew whether the papers had spoken of any accident near Arcy-sur-Beuvron. The other replied that he didn't; and, indeed, I have not seen an account of the drowning of the Vignemals in any of the papers."

"Nor I, but how did this man know of it?"

"He played a part in it, my dear friend."

"Impossible! My uncle's servant followed him to the ferry-boat, and he saw no one. He said that a vagabond was prowling about who looked rather suspicious, but——"

"The vagabond has nothing to do with the majestic traveller who, in my presence, related the pathetic tale which I will now tell you. Listen to me attentively; you will think that you are there. I have considerable talent as a mimic."

Pomméval was inwardly raging against the unreasonably long story which his future brother-in-law was spinning out; but he would have

gained nothing by interrupting him, and so he resigned himself to enduring this flow of words in the hope that some useful information might come at last.

"I must tell you, sir," began the incorrigible Alfred, with a strong nasal twang, "I must tell you that I own, not far from this little town, a modest country-seat, where I sometimes go, even in the winter, to get a breath of pure air. This little place of mine is near a water-course which, though not large, is nevertheless impetuous at certain times."

"Alfred! my friend. I beg of you——"

"Be calm! I am coming to the end. Punch in spectacles continued in these words: 'I was there, and had been there a week or so, when, on Tuesday evening, I was summoned to Paris on very urgent business. Although the weather was frightful, I got ready to take the nine forty-five train which leaves from the Pont-aux-Mouettes station.' Aha! you are beginning to be interested now!"

"Could this man have seen——"

"My dear friend, you will be indebted to this idiot for your uncle's inheritance. At the very moment when he was crossing the bridge he heard some cries for help; he looked over the railing and saw a drowning man holding on to a boat which was upset—it was, it appears, bright moonlight—and almost immediately the boat was dashed against the side of the bridge, and both man and boat disappeared."

"But this fool of a man was a wretch, then!" exclaimed Arthur du Pomméval. "He ought to have jumped into the water and have tried to save the drowning man, or at least have called for help. But he quietly went on his way, it appears?"

"Yes, indeed!" rejoined Alfred. "He did not know how to swim, and he was afraid of missing the nine forty-five train. So he ran to the station, which is three hundred yards from the bridge. The train was in. He had only just time to take it. But before starting he spoke of the accident to a porter who was shutting the carriage doors, but who did not see fit to stop and leave his post to go and drag the river. It is monstrous, no doubt, but such are the facts. Well! what do you say to my story?" resumed Alfred, after a pause. "Do you doubt that your uncle was still alive half an hour after the accident?"

"No, although the gipsy says that he disappeared when the boat sank."

"Your gipsy told a falsehood, or he did not see things distinctly. People fall into the water, but they come up to the surface and catch at whatever they can grasp—and your uncle must have caught hold of the boat, which was floating bottom upwards; he must have held on fast, and have been borne away with it. He might, perhaps, have been saved if the current had not been so strong. Be that as it may, don't imagine that my Punch concocted this story which does him no credit. People do not usually boast of behaving like cravens."

"That's true," said Pomméval, reflecting, "but you ought to have asked his name."

"I didn't think of it," rejoined young Alfred. "You see I had no idea that your uncle was the drowned man. When I am in Paris I always avoid getting letters from La Germonière, and the old chap's story did not interest me in the least. I listened to him simply because his ridiculous accent amused me, and it is a miracle that I remember a word of what he said."

"How can this man be found?"

"It wouldn't be difficult."

"Would you know him again?"

"Oh, yes, a mile off. Heads like his are scarce."

"Good! but where is he now?"

"At home, of course, at the country seat where he goes 'to get a breath of pure air' in winter, from the meadows, you know! I forgot to tell you that he got out at the Point-aux-Mouettes station."

"I will go there at once," said Pomméval, promptly.

"Let us go together, if you wish it, my dear friend. But I don't believe that it is worth your while disturbing yourself, for I forgot to add that the respectable old dunce came back to inquire after the drowned man whom he left in the water for fear of missing the train and risking his neck. He declared, in a loud and intelligible voice, that he was resolved on going to make a statement of the facts to the authorities of Arcy, and you may believe that he won't lose so good an opportunity of making himself important. I shouldn't be surprised if he went himself to see the mayor, the sub-prefect, the public prosecutor, and everybody else. He believes that a crime has been committed, and merely for the pleasure of seeing his name in the *Gazette des Tribunaux*, he would willingly travel two hundred miles."

The heir began to hope once more. His cause was gained both at court and at La Germonière. Fortune, which had nearly escaped him, was his once more, thanks to providential chance. And he could with full assurance profit by the permission that Germaine had granted him. He thought for a moment of going, under any circumstances, to call upon the judge; but he soon reflected that there was no longer any motive for his doing so, and that it would be unwise. It was better to let the blessed old Punch go first, and proclaim of his own accord that Monsieur Vignemal had survived his wife.

Doubt was no longer possible, as the body had been found, and the wreck of the boat also, both at the very spot where a landowner, a personage worthy of belief, had seen the barque and its lost owner struggling with the waves. The distance between the Fougeray ferry and the Pont-aux-Mouettes was such that Madame Vignemal must have sunk at least twenty minutes before her husband, even admitting that she still lived at the time when Roch Ferrer had left her upon the river banks.

"My dear Alfred," said Pomméval, after a pause, "it is very pleasant to me to hear from you that I can, without anxiety or regret, assure Madame Daudierne that I shall bring Mademoiselle Germaine a fortune worthy of her. You can attest this if necessary."

"Did you tell them of your doubts?"

"No," replied Pomméval. "I intended to tell them to-day that the question of the heirship was not finally settled, and I would have offered to withdraw, if——"

"Don't tell them anything of the kind, my dear friend," interrupted Alfred. "You are now sure of your facts. What good would it do to revert to the former aspect of the case? My uncle is as fussy as he can be, and he would ask you no end of questions. If you take my advice, we will go to La Germonière together. I am no longer afraid of appearing there, as you have promised to get me out of the scrape I am in."

"I have the four thousand francs at home," said the future brother-in-law, eagerly. "Shall we go there and get them?"

"I should say so, indeed! Thank you, my dear friend, you will save

my credit, which greatly needs being saved. To-morrow the rascally keeper of the gambling shop shall be paid; you are doing me a great service, and I declare that I won't forget it. Come, is it agreed that we shall go to see mamma?"

"My brougham must be ready. We shall be at La Germonière in half-an-hour. On our way back we will pass by the Pont-aux-Mouettes."

"That's a good idea! I will question the people at the station about the man with the spectacles, and if he is at home I will introduce him to you."

This was exactly what Pomméval wished, and he was well pleased, indeed. He had now an ally at La Germonière, but he did not yet know that he had an enemy there as well. He took the arm of Germaine's brother, and they went away together under the eyes of the whist-players, who remarked to one another: "The match is made! The money of those Vignemals will be all squandered in Paris."

V.

"MY dear Pomméval, allow me to introduce to you our present neighbour, Monsieur Pontac, of the 9th Hussars. Monsieur Pontac intends to remain a few days longer in the neighbourhood. Allow me, monsieur, to make you acquainted with Monsieur Arthur du Pomméval, a friend of our family, whom you will often meet if you remain here at La Germonière. I do not introduce you to my nephew, Alfred Daudierne, as you will see the bad fellow only too often," laughingly added uncle Armand, having gone through all the necessary formalities of introducing two strangers to each other.

Half-an-hour previously M. Vignemal's heir had left his brougham in the courtyard, and twenty minutes later Madame Vignemal's cousin had made his appearance on foot, and walked into the park. Chance is a great creator of effects. It ripens situations, brings about scenes, and hastens final events. The two rivals had met in the drawing-room, where all the Daudierne's were assembled, and this was most unexpected to them. Pomméval, relieved from his great anxiety, had not lost a moment in repairing to La Germonière with young Alfred, who had given him such important information.

Pontac, more anxious than ever, had, after long hesitation, made up his mind to follow Germaine's advice, which was almost an order. He was now returning the visit which M. Armand Daudierne had made at Bretteville, and by doing so he established an acquaintance from which he expected naught but sorrow, for he did not flatter himself that it could end in a betrothal between himself, a poor sub-lieutenant, and a young girl who was so well endowed both by fortune and nature.

He had, however, one advantage over his millionaire competitor. He knew of Pomméval far back, and he knew that Pomméval had but a few days before become a regularly received suitor, favoured by the mother, and allowed by the daughter to pay his court, while handsome Arthur, on his side, did not know that the light-haired man who had so suddenly appeared at La Germonière was deeply in love with Germaine, and that she herself had so far done nothing to discourage him. Pomméval did not even remember having ever seen him, and the name of Pontac did not recall anything to his mind.

They had, however, passed one another more than once in the high street of Arcy, during holiday time, in the days when Roger was studying at the Saint Louis College and Arthur was acquiring the art of tying his necktie in a boarding-school in the Faubourg-Saint-Honoré. But they were both children then, and ten years in Africa change a man's face. Besides, handsome Arthur had never noticed the shabby lad who lived on his cousin's charity; a cousin who was but very indirectly connected, and by marriage only, with the Pommévals.

Arthur had not even remarked Roger among the large number of persons who attended the Vignemals' funeral. The young officer had certainly been present at the ceremony, but he had not spoken to anybody, and no one had paid any attention to him. He thought so, at all events, and he had reason to think it, for he had not recognised a single one of his co-heirs among the peasants who were there.

On the other hand, Pomméval was superior in many respects to Pontac; he was accustomed to society and its ways, knew how to dress, had a talent for saying the most common-place things in choice language, with full command of fashionable jargon, and that ease which can only be acquired by frequenting ladies' society. Roger, when he looked at him, thought himself awkward; he blushed at being clad like an officer on furlough, and he was wrong there, for the natural elegance of his person made up for the simplicity of his dress, while his reserve was far from being awkwardness.

However, Pomméval had that day been fortunate enough to reach La Germonière first. He was already standing near the fireplace, between Madame Daudierne and her daughters, when Pontac entered the drawing-room, where he now appeared for the first time. Pomméval could thus enjoy all the natural embarrassment which the newcomer's somewhat stiff manner betrayed. He had already anchored on the shore, while the latter was still at sea. Besides, Pomméval knew the land, and how it lay. He had been long acquainted with Madame Daudierne and uncle Armand. He knew how to please them. With the young ladies subjects of conversation never failed him. He was not reduced to sighing like an inexperienced lover; he could envelop a compliment in some apt reminiscence, or make an ardent declaration by discreetly alluding to some remark uttered at a ball.

Roger, on the contrary, was just landed on unknown shores, and prudence condemned him to silence, lest he should err. What could he talk of, even to Germaine? Of their love, which had no past, as it dated from the trip to the Roche-de-Lémon—a trip which the young girl had told no one of? There was nothing yet to say about it.

Madame Daudierne came to the lieutenant's rescue, without suspecting how important a service she rendered him. "I am happy to be able at last to thank you, sir," she said, with her most gracious smile. "My brother-in-law is indebted to you for Monsieur de Bretteville's kind invitation, and I am indebted to you for not having forgotten the way to La Germonière. I will even confess to you that we rely upon you to help us to while away a few weeks more in the country. We shall not leave Normandy till the end of the year, and during the month of December we shall be almost alone here. Our young people from Arcy will take wing for Paris, and Monsieur du Pomméval, who does not desert us, is in mourning. We shall not give any entertainments, but we shall be glad to see our friends, and you are one of them."

Roger replied as was suitable to these kind words, and this time he did not excuse himself by saying that he would soon be recalled to his regiment. He had read on Germaine's face that she wished him to accept without demur.

The name of the Duke de Bretteville had produced an effect. M. du Pomméval had never been invited to the château, and he did not know the duke, except by sight, although he often spoke of him with familiarity. He now looked with more respect at the officer who was the friend of a great nobleman, and resolved to avail himself of this opportunity to have the doors of aristocratic society thrown open to him. Young Alfred was no less desirous than his friend of entering into neighbourly relations with the man of the highest rank in the country round, and he immediately felt the necessity of being extremely polite to Roger Pontac, whom he had been inclined to look upon as a bore.

"You are in a cavalry regiment, are you not, sir?" he said, bluntly, "and you must be fond of horses; I adore them. I served as a one-year volunteer in the 19th Dragoons, and I flatter myself that I can ride tolerably well. It isn't in the regiment that I learned to do so, thank heavens, for I should not know much if I had. The method followed by military teachers is usually detestable."

"I am not altogether of your opinion, sir," replied Roger, modestly.

"Of course not, as you are in the swing. You would never admit, for instance, that the worst sportsman in all England knows more than all the French cavalry. But that isn't the question. I should be delighted to go hunting with you to show you the paces of a half-bred which I bought this year at Tattersall's—Ralph, of the stock of Rob Roy and Gypsy."

"I advise you to boast of your Ralph," exclaimed uncle Armand, "after his running away with Germaine the other day, and nearly breaking her neck!"

"That was a good thing!" cried young Alfred. "It was her own fault. She ought not to have ridden him without my permission."

"I did without it, and I shall do so again if I take a fancy to ride Ralph," retorted Germaine.

"My two saddle-horses are at your disposal, mademoiselle," said Pomméval, at once.

"Thanks! I was too much frightened the other day. 'All's well that ends well,' and my enforced gallop ended well, but I shall never confide in half-breeds again. I shall do like Laurence, who contents herself with one of our mares. It isn't at all dangerous to ride those animals, for they won't run away. They are like rocking-horses."

Alfred began to laugh, and hum in a low tone an air which, at that time, was sung at most of the Parisian music-halls. "For he is stone, all stone!" an illusion to the sculptural courser which the effigy of Henri IV. bestrides at the Pont Neuf.

Pontac had been on live coals when he heard this giddy-pate talking of Ralph, and he had almost lost countenance. Germaine prevented this, however, by speaking, and her words went to his heart.

"We have had many emotions for some days past," said Madame Daudierne, after he had seated himself before the fire near her and her brother. "My daughter was almost lost on account of that unruly horse, who nearly threw her over a precipice, and we were very anxious for a full hour."

"Monsieur Pontac can easily believe that, when he hears that Laurence

and I looked for Germaine everywhere, and that night fell and we had to return without having found her," said uncle Armand.

"And only the evening before," resumed Madame Daudierne, "the uncle and aunt of Monsieur du Pomméval were drowned in crossing the river at the bottom of our garden. You have certainly heard of this frightful mishap?"

"Yes, madame, on the following day, from Monsieur de Bretteville's servants."

"There is no proof that it was an accident," exclaimed uncle Armand. "There is a fellow who played an unaccountable part in the affair. It was the gipsy whom I mentioned to the duke. I asked him to bid his gamekeepers to have an eye on him. But I am afraid that my warning will do no good. The duke doesn't appear to me to be disposed to do what is necessary to put an end to the depredations of this poacher."

"He is always unwilling to take severe measures against poor people, and now, more than ever, he is inclined to be indulgent. He is wrapped up in his sad thoughts."

"That doesn't prevent him from being the most courteous gentleman that I have ever met. He received me as though he had always known me, and I am really confused at his kind offers of the use of his woods, his gamekeepers, horses, and game. I scarcely dare venture to accept. You had something to do with this reception, my dear lieutenant, but no matter. I am beginning to give up the prejudices that I had against the old nobility."

"Tell me, uncle," interrupted young Alfred, "will you take me with you when you go shooting at Bretteville?"

"You! Never in the world, my lad! You fire too well. I haven't the least wish to be hit by some of the shot which you intend for a roebuck. What I tell you is for your own sake. You would be accused of having shot me so as to become my heir."

"Armand! my friend!" remonstrated Madame Daudierne.

"Alfred knows very well that I am joking. But the truth is, that he isn't invited, and I cannot venture to take him with me."

"I have no doubt," observed Roger, "but what Monsieur de Bretteville will be very happy to be agreeable to any member of your family. Your nephew will be welcome at the château, and if it suited the ladies to be present at a great beating up of the woods——"

"Oh, that would be delightful!" interrupted Germaine. "What do you say to it, Laurence?"

"I have nothing to say," said the elder sister, looking askance at Madame Vignemal's heir.

"And Monsieur du Pomméval must come, too," added Germaine. "No mourning in the world need prevent firing a few shots."

"I haven't the honour of knowing the Duke de Bretteville," murmured Arthur, who was delighted by this opening.

Roger Pontac did not care to invite his rival, but he read in Germaine's eyes an entreaty which he interpreted in his own way. "She is afraid that Madame Daudierne won't make up the party if her chosen son-in-law is not invited," he thought.

For that reason he at once replied that the duke invited his neighbours at La Germonière and their friends as well, whereupon he had the satisfaction of receiving the warm thanks of a man whom he had no cause to like.

"This will be delightful," said uncle Armand, heartily. "Monsieur Pontac will tell us what day Monsieur de Bretteville may appoint, and the party will be complete, as we shall all go. I am beginning to think that pleasures, like misfortunes, never come singly. I have just come from Arcy, and I heard there some news that will interest you very much, my dear Arthur."

"You said nothing about going to town," interrupted Madame Daudierne. "Had I known of it I should have——"

"Loaded me with commissions, eh?" broke in uncle Armand. "Well, I purposely avoided that, my dear Reine. I wished to talk to Monsieur Lestrignon, the presiding judge."

"Did you see him?" asked Pomméval, eagerly.

"I spent an hour with him," replied the elder M. Daudierne, "and I may as well say that we talked of your affairs."

At the outset of these unexpected remarks, Arthur, who was considerably startled, had begun to listen attentively, and when he heard that he had been discussed by the judge at Arcy, and Germaine's uncle, he was visibly disturbed.

He was now about to know the truth, for M. Lestrignon must have an opinion as to the probable result of the lawsuit, and the heir was perhaps about to learn that, in the mind of that enlightened magistrate, his cause was lost beforehand.

"Don't be alarmed," resumed uncle Armand, smiling. "I told you just now that to-day was full of good news, and I don't mean to contradict myself. Your affairs are progressing favourably, but you don't know what danger you have been in."

"Danger?" ejaculated Madame Daudierne, greatly surprised.

"Yes; the danger of losing the inheritance of the Vignemals."

"My dear Armand, I don't think that this is a time to speak of a subject which only interests Monsieur du Pomméval—and ourselves."

"Why do you say that, my dear Reine? Monsieur Pontac is a stranger here, and it doesn't matter to him who inherits from the Vignemal family. But he is our acquaintance now, and he will be glad to know that our friend Pomméval will get this disputed fortune which is coveted by a lot of worthless people, greedy peasants, and of no great account. I am sure that you rejoice with us, lieutenant?"

Roger Pontac made a gesture of assent, and he deserved credit for making such a return to the poor compliment which M. Daudierne had unwittingly paid him. He was one of the heirs-at-law so harshly spoken of by a man who knew nothing about them; and although he did not covet his cousin's wealth, he could not rejoice at seeing it go to his rival. He said to himself that, if chance had not enriched M. du Pomméval, Madame Daudierne would not be marrying her daughter to this fine gentleman, who was already so involved in debt, and Roger's self-abnegation did not go so far as to make him rejoice over an event which ruined his hopes.

"By-the-bye," resumed uncle Armand, "the story is a funny one, and would amuse anybody. Let me tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that we were altogether mistaken as to the bearings of the famous clause 722, and others besides ourselves are also mistaken as to it. But what could we expect?" added uncle Armand, looking at his nephew with a quizzical expression. "Alfred wasn't here. If we had had him with us he would have explained all about inheritances."

"Who? I?" said Alfred. "Not I, indeed! I am still preparing for my first examination, and that chapter is no part of the programme."

"Then we don't lose anything, and I don't regret that we fell into error. If Monsieur du Pomméval had known his real situation he would have passed many sleepless nights."

"I was aware of it," said Arthur, with unfeigned annoyance, although he was now somewhat comforted.

"And you did not tell us?"

"No; that is—I came to-day expressly to tell you that the law is against me, and that I am no richer than I was a week ago. It costs me dear to make this confession; but for reasons which you understand, I could not allow you to remain in the dark."

"My dear Pomméval, your words do you credit, and I am certain that my sister-in-law and my nieces are obliged to you for this."

Madame Daudierne made a gesture of approval while Germaine smiled. But Laurence did not raise her eyes. However, she listened with very great attention, and did not lose a word of what was said. Roger listened also, and for fear of allowing his thoughts to be seen, kept still. He sat as stiffly as though he had been on parade, and did not take his eyes off Germaine.

"Fortunately," resumed uncle Armand, "you will not need to give us this proof of your honour which I expected, certainly, for I won't hesitate to say that I had my doubts as to my own and Dr. Subligny's knowledge of the law. I wished to consult an able man, and I could not have found a better one than Monsieur Lestrigon, who is thoroughly versed in his profession. I had the good luck to meet him, and I now know all that I wished to know. The first thing that he told me was, that you had no right to the property, and that, to inherit it, you must furnish full proof that your uncle outlived his wife. I, for my part, felt sure that he had not survived her, for I believed in the testimony of the poacher who saw Madame Vignemal a few moments after the accident. It is very probable that she still breathed then, and she would perhaps have been roused from her fainting condition if the man called Roch had not abandoned her. It would then have happened that her will would have 'lapsed,' that is the legal term, and means have become *worthless*. There is no inheritance when you die before the person whose heir you are, and I was very much inclined to believe that this was the state of the case as regards Monsieur Vignemal."

"I thought the same," said Pomméval, in a low tone.

Madame Daudierne did not appear to understand her brother-in-law's explanations very well; but it was easy to see that she was anxious, and that it was not a matter of indifference to her whether her future son-in-law lost the two millions in question or not. Alfred, meanwhile, was laughing in his sleeve. He flattered himself that he knew the secret of all this, and he promised himself to "flatten them all" with astonishment when he told the story of the man with the Punch's face whom he had met in the railway train.

Pontac, for his part, clearly realised that he had been near receiving a part of the inheritance, and he was not sorry for the chance of hearing to what unforeseen circumstance he would be indebted for continued poverty. Germaine and Laurence evidently took the liveliest interest in their uncle's narrative. They did not allow themselves to interrupt him by questions or reflections, but it was easy to see that they waited with impatience for

the end of his story. Germaine was somewhat uneasy, and Laurence made little nervous gestures which interfered with the symmetry of her embroidery.

"Well, my dear friend," resumed M. Daudierne, "we were unnecessarily alarmed. The judge, who is very shrewd, had guessed, I suppose, that I wished to know what chances you still had. He amused himself by keeping me on the rack for a full quarter of an hour, and after having expatiated for a long time as to the judicial difficulties which might arise in the course of a lawsuit of this kind, he asked me, with a smile, if I had not met an old gentleman in the hall. I told him that I had, and that the old gentleman in question was quite unknown to me. He then told me that he was a retired merchant, who had made his fortune; and as this information did not interest me much, he added that the gentleman in question, who had formerly lived in Paris, had built a kind of country seat about a hundred yards from the Pont-aux-Mouettes."

"I'll bet that he had a profile like Punch, and wore gold spectacles as well," exclaimed young Alfred.

"So he had; but how the mischief did you find that out?" asked uncle Armand, fairly bewildered.

"I know him. I know your retired grocer. I passed five hours in his agreeable society this morning, and I can tell you exactly what he told Monsieur Lestrigon. I don't know his name, but I know his narrative—Daddy Vignemal clutching hold of the boat which was dashed against one of the pillars of the bridge; daddy Vignemal calling for help, and the heroic grocer going on his way so as not to miss the train he wanted to catch. Besides, Arthur knows the whole story, for I told it to him at the Arcy Club."

"Then, my dear Pomméval, I am telling you nothing new?" said uncle Armand, a trifle vexed at being the bearer of stale news.

"You give me the most joyful intelligence, sir," said the heir. "Alfred could not tell me what had become of the providential traveller. I hoped to find him, but was by no means sure of doing so, and in the event of a failure—a very probable contingency—I should certainly have lost my suit as regards this property. For that reason I spoke as I did just now. However, at present you tell me that he went of his own accord to see the presiding judge. I could not have asked anything better."

"No, for this old dealer is a very honest man, and his testimony will settle the matter. You owe him no gratitude, since he has served you unintentionally, but it must be admitted that he has been zealous, for he came from Paris expressly. It seems, too, that when he reached the Rue Mauconseil, where he lives in a house belonging to him, he wrote to the judge to tell him of the accident which he had witnessed."

"I now understand why Monsieur Lestrigon allowed Dr. Subligny to suppose that I might not lose the suit."

"I must tell you that he has long been acquainted with Monsieur Grandminard, whom he thoroughly esteems," said uncle Armand.

"Is the old foggy's name Grandminard?" cried young Alfred. "That is all he needed to make him perfect."

"I forbid you to make fun of him," retorted M. Daudierne. "He is a saviour, indeed. The judge told me positively that nothing would prevail against the precise statement of a witness worthy of belief—a witness who saw Vignemal above water, and clearly heard him calling out for help thirty minutes after the upsetting of the boat. He even thinks that our friend's rights will not be disputed at all, and that he can take possession."

"I trust that he may speak true!" muttered Pomméval. "It would be very painful for me to plead against poor people."

"They won't risk it. It would be necessary, you see, for them to prove that Madame Vignemal lived for three-quarters of an hour under water, or nearly as long, as her body remained but an instant upon the shore. And the only witness whom they could bring forward is this fellow Roch Ferrer, whom nobody would pay any attention to. In any case, what would he say? That he saw the drowned woman, we already know? Things may have occurred differently from what he originally stated. But he will not have the audacity to declare before a court that his first story was false."

"I always thought that he did not tell you the facts," muttered Laurence, without raising her eyes.

"You are very severe as regards one of your admirers," retorted uncle Armand, "for the lad is in love with you. The other evening, in the kitchen, he couldn't take his eyes off you. You seemed to strike him dumb. Oh, he is a bold fellow! but if one of you young ladies wish to take his portrait, you had better make haste about it, for one of these days he will be caged. The public prosecutor suspects him of much more serious things than poaching. It seems that an investigation has been made as to the part which he played in the drama which cost the Vignemals their lives, and if this turns against him he will be arrested."

"I should be very sorry to hear of it," said Germaine; "a pet of the doctor's cannot be a rascal."

"I should be sorry, too," said M. Daudierne, "but not for the same reason. I am, on the contrary, disposed to believe that our worthy friend Subigny is deceived about this young man. If Roch is brought to trial on account of the ferry-boat accident, the criminal suit would complicate our friend Pomméval's affairs. At least, such is Monsieur Lestrigon's opinion, and he knows what he is talking about."

"Supposing we talk about something else," suggested Madame Daudierne. "What pleasure can you take, my dear Armand, in reminding me of an event which I cannot even think about without emotion? I am sure that these gentlemen would rather talk of something less sad."

"Oh, I believe that the girls would rather waltz; but it is no time for that, and waltzes are not on hand. Besides, Pomméval is in deep mourning."

"We might have a little music," said Germaine.

"Are you fond of music, Monsieur Pontac?" asked uncle Armand.

"Very fond, indeed, sir; but I don't know a single note."

"You must know some Arab songs. If you would sing us some of them, my nieces, who are excellent musicians, will accompany you. That will be a change from the symphonies, sonatas, and other scientific performances which they habitually inflict upon me. What do you say to it, Laurence?"

Uncle Armand's proposal suited everybody excepting those who were asked to go to the piano.

Madame Daudierne was only too glad to put an end to a conversation, which had been kept up too long, on the subject of the death of her neighbours and their heirs. Alfred wished to find a chance of divesting himself of the four thousand francs which he had just borrowed. Pomméval wished to carry on his courtship of the younger sister while the elder was playing the accompaniment to the Oriental songs, and Germaine was delighted at the thought of hearing Roger sing in the full deep voice which

she had heard for the first time at the foot of the Roche-de-Lémon. Pontac, however, did not care to entertain the company, and Laurence did not wish to approach the piano that evening.

"I do not know how to sing," said the sub-lieutenant, "and Arab tunes won't please scientific players. They have false notes every now and then, and the words would grate upon French ears."

"I excuse myself," said Laurence, "for I cannot accompany anything that I do not understand, and I do not know the first word of Arabic."

"That is a reply from Molière's 'Femmes Savantes,'" exclaimed her uncle. "Excuse me, sir, I am not learned in Greek."

"Well, I'll venture," said Germaine, rising. "So much the worse if I don't keep time. Monsieur Pontac will have to start afresh, and I shall catch the movement after a while."

"Mademoiselle," entreated Roger, "I assure you that my tunes will bore you to death. They are monotonous psalmodies, airs that we tolerate in Moorish coffee-houses, because they send us to sleep just like the tobacco when we smoke a *narghile*. Here they would seem ridiculous, however."

"I don't think that they would. I like indefinite airs."

"By virtue of the law of contrasts, then," said M. Daudierne, "for I don't know any one who has a more positive mind than you have."

"Is that any reason why I shouldn't appreciate the charm of Oriental music?" retorted Germaine. "I have often heard Félicien David's 'Désert,' and I admire it very much; you must confess that you are the only one who does not like music."

"I don't dislike it; but I am afraid of it. If I were a husband or a father, I should forbid my wife or daughter to play upon the piano, or to be acquainted with musical people. I shall be none the less charmed to hear an Arab air sung by an officer of our African army, and accompanied by a Parisian pianist. Such an occasion does not often present itself at Arcy-sur-Beuvron."

"Monsieur Pontac," said Germaine, in a gay tone, "as my uncle himself begs you to sing, you can hardly refuse. Come, and you shall see how I arrange the accompaniment."

Roger was obliged to submit; but he did not like making a spectacle of himself before M. du Pomméval. There was one compensation, that he would be apart from the rest of the company with Germaine, and she had not yet been able to say a word to him that everybody present could not hear. However, he did not expect much from this seeming *tête-à-tête*. All eyes would be fixed upon them, and he was more than ever desirous of concealing the feelings which disturbed him.

Germaine now took her place at the piano, and Roger was obliged to follow her. To his great relief he soon saw that he would not be very closely watched during this suddenly-arranged concert. Uncle Armand went to seat himself at the other end of the room on a sofa. He did not care to remain near the loud instrument which he dreaded so much.

Alfred was already hurrying to the door. He had arrived in a travelling-suit, and with a well-filled portfolio. He wished to slip into his room and place his money in a safe place, and then steal to the stables to see whether Germaine's ride had injured Ralph's knees. Laurence, meanwhile, bent over her embroidery, and Pomméval, who did not distrust the hussar officer, had the good taste to go toward hers, under pretence of complimenting her upon her needlework. He knew that he had done her wrong, and wished to be forgiven.

Madame Daudierne, on her side, went towards her brother-in-law. She did not fear that Pontac would attempt to court her daughter; she felt, besides, that an explanation between her elder daughter and her future son-in-law was, under the peculiar circumstances, inevitable, and she considered the opportunity a good one.

She did not wish to spoil it, and besides, she had some questions to ask the good uncle who had brought such happy news. Thus, and quite naturally, the family and the lovers were all divided into couples, and each couple was sufficiently far from the others to talk freely, providing they did not speak too loud.

"My uncle's idea was a good one," said Germaine, running her fingers over the keyboard. "If you sung a *romanza*, or an opera air, I should be obliged to put up a music-book before me, and should require to have the leaves turned over for me, as you do not know the notes. But the Arab air not having been written out, we need have no one but ourselves at the piano."

"And I shall be able to tell you——"

"Whatever you have to tell, between two melodies. But first give me the pitch. Sing the first lines."

"*Ta thir ennouba*," sung Roger, in a slow and mournful strain. He had a tuneful voice, and sang expressively.

"I have it!" exclaimed Germaine, playing a few chords. "That is charming. It sounds like Italian. Now, I imagined that Arabian was a hoarse-sounding language. Sing the next line."

"*Sir ou sellen alâ el mahbouba*."

"*Mahbouba* is somewhat harsh, on account of the *h*. Tell me, what does it mean?" asked Germaine.

"Beloved."

"Very good. Tell me what is the meaning of the first part."

"*Go sing, sweet songster, to my well-beloved*," replied Roger. "The rest is not worth explaining. It is a paraphrase of the first part, and the same comes back all the time."

"Good! now I know enough to follow you. I will help you by playing a loud accompaniment. Try to remember several verses. I have a great deal to tell you. Go on!"

Roger began the air at a well-chosen pitch: low enough to admit of his hearing what Germaine said to him, and loud enough to prevent her words from reaching the ears for which they were not meant. The difficulty lay in replying, for it is, of course, impossible to sing and talk at the same time. However, this attempt at an Arab concert necessitated frequent interruptions, and the latter gave vocalist and pianist a chance to exchange a few words.

"The die is cast," said Germaine, while Roger sang in Arabic the message which the tuneful bird carried to the well-beloved. "Monsieur du Pomméval is the heir. My sister will have a husband who is a millionaire. Yes, my sister. Don't you see that I have arranged to let them have a private talk? Laurence will know how to win him back. I think that they must be getting on very well together, for, like ourselves, they seem to be quite confidential. My brother has slipped away; my mother and my uncle are whispering, and won't disturb them. I know, too, that mamma would prefer to marry off my elder sister before me. You'll see, everything will be arranged. Monsieur du Pomméval will realise that he has taken a mere caprice for a serious attachment, and he will return to

her whom he really loves and who is suited to him. It is this annoying inheritance that has upset his brain. He imagines that I should help him better than Laurence in spending his money. He thinks that I am an exceedingly worldly person, but I really only care for the pleasures of home-life. I am right, am I not, in despising money ? I already realised that we had the same ideal as to life. You did not blench when my uncle announced that your cousin's money would all go to a stranger."

"You knew, then, that Madame Vignemal was my cousin ?" asked Roger in surprise.

He spoke so quickly, and in so subdued a tone, that his words mingled with the *ritornello* of the first verse, which he was just finishing at the same time.

"Begin the second verse of the song," said Germaine, striking several clear chords with her flexible fingers. "I haven't yet finished. Dr. Subligny spoke to us about you on the very evening when the accident happened. He even told us your name. My mother, my uncle, and my sister have forgotten what he then said to us about your childhood and sudden disappearance. I remembered it, however, but I said nothing. What would be the use of setting yourself up to oppose Monsieur du Pomméval, who comes in for the money in your place ? The doctor thinks like me that it would be useless, for when he introduced you to my mother he took care not to mention your relationship to Madame Vignemal. Imitate his prudence if you would please me."

Roger would gladly have shortened the second verse to proclaim his willing obedience, but Germaine quickly resumed: "Not a word more, pray ! My uncle is looking towards us."

He was, indeed, but without any intention of watching the pair, who were not in his mind at the moment.

"Has Pomméval anything particular to say to your elder daughter ?" he asked of his sister-in-law. "He hasn't previously spoken to her this evening, but now he seems very eloquent."

"I am glad that he is, my dear Armand," replied Madame Daudierne. "Laurence may have previously thought that Monsieur du Pomméval was courting her ; and she has not perhaps remained insensible to his attentions, which at one time were very marked. She certainly isn't jealous of Germaine's happiness ; but she is a woman for all that, and Monsieur du Pomméval, no doubt, thinks that he owes her some explanation."

"Explanations never do any good in such cases, my dear Reine," replied uncle Armand. "Wounded hearts are not cured with excuses. But I hope that Laurence does not love him."

Madame Daudierne and her brother-in-law were both mistaken, and would have realised that such was the case if they had heard the conversation which was going on between the two young people.

"You attempt, then, to deny that your newly-acquired wealth has changed your feelings ?" said Laurence, seemingly counting the stitches of her embroidery.

"I assure you that I regret not having shown them more clearly, as you have mistaken my true sentiments," stammered Pomméval.

"Even if your repentance were sincere," retorted Laurence, "it would not repair the harm you have done me, but I know why you have played an unworthy part. Before the accident which enriched you, you did not hope that you could win the hand of my younger sister, and if you had failed in that, you would have been satisfied to marry me instead of her."

I was an alternative, and only that. I forgive you for this odious calculation, but I pray Heaven that Germaine will decline to become your wife, for I love her, and you would deceive her as you have deceived me. She will, I hope, reject you, when she knows you as you really are. Your treachery will not bring you any good luck, I predict that, and you will find that I speak truly."

The heir to the Vignemal property, greatly disturbed by this virtual declaration of war, was about to attempt to justify himself once more, but the Arab song had come to an end, and silence suddenly reigned in the drawing-room. Germaine closed the piano; her mother and her uncle rose to thank the lieutenant, who had given them the pleasure of hearing a specimen of primitive poetry and wild music, Laurence herself gave up her embroidery, and Pomméval was obliged to remain silent.

"That's charming," said M. Daudierne, heartily, although he had listened but little. "You ought to renounce Beethoven and Mozart, girls; they send me to sleep. I best like the airs which have never been written. The redskins of America have some very pretty Indian songs."

"So have the gipsies," replied Germaine, laughing. "Shall we send for Roch Ferrer?"

"I hope that the scamp will never set foot at La Germonière again," rejoined her uncle. "He will sleep in prison one of these days, and he will richly deserve it. Didn't I tell you that the public prosecutor suspects him of having drowned our neighbours, whom he pretends that he tried to rescue?"

"Yes, but I shall never believe it," was Germaine's prompt reply.

"Because I haven't told you all. It appears that he has been paid to do it by a cousin of Madame Vignemal, who left the country years ago, but who returned here expressly to commit this evil deed. He is being looked for, and as soon as he is found he will be brought before the assizes, in consequence of the investigations now being made."

Roger Pontac started. The cousin who was suspected of an abominable crime was evidently himself. No other relative of Madame Vignemal had left the country and returned there, unknown to all. The accusation was an absurd one, no doubt, and not worth minding. Still he almost forgot Germaine's request, and nearly revealed his identity, although she had requested him not to speak out yet. Fortunately, she intervened, saying: "This must be a pure invention, uncle, this relation coming back just in time to drown people. I did not know that magistrates had so much imagination. They invent theatrical situations, it appears."

"Monsieur Lestrignon is incapable of falsehood, and it is from him that I have the information," retorted uncle Armand. "Madame Vignemal, out of sheer charity, brought up a little rascal, who repaid her very badly for her kindness. He ran away from school some ten years ago, and he has never been heard of since."

"It seems to me," muttered Madame Daudierne, "that the doctor told us that story."

"He did," said her brother-in-law. "I think that he told us the man's name, too, but I have forgotten it, and I didn't think of asking the judge what it was. It is certain, however, that this young fellow was seen on the night of or the night before the accident. He was prowling about the Vignemals' grounds. The gardener recognised him. Unfortunately, he did not think of following him."

"And since that meeting this ever-fitting cousin hasn't shown himself,

"I suppose?" said Germaine, in an ironical tone. "He has a talisman, perhaps, by which he becomes invisible."

"You laugh and joke, my little girl," replied uncle Armand. "You are wrong. It is positively known that this fellow is hidden somewhere near Le Fougeray, and he is being looked for quietly, in order not to arouse the suspicions of his accomplice."

"His accomplice? That is Roch Ferrer, I suppose?"

"Of course it is," said M. Daudierne, promptly. "The two rascals must have come to an understanding at once."

"They know one another, then?"

"No one can tell; but, let this be as it may, they could easily have plotted together upon the roadside or in some wood. The gipsy has no fixed abode. He passes his nights in the open air, and he never sleeps twice in the same place."

"Oh, he doesn't go far from La Germonière, and I'll venture to say that if Laurence would agree to take his portrait he could easily be found to sit for it."

"Perhaps so; but I do not wish to do so," said Laurence, dryly.

"But why?" resumed Germaine. "Why doesn't any one question the poor fellow, as he is suspected? He would justify himself, I don't doubt it."

"They are waiting to take the other man before they arrest him. If Roch were imprisoned, the cousin whom they are looking for would make haste to get out of the way, and then they could not be brought face to face before the magistrates."

Roger Pontac listened frowning to uncle Armand's remarks, and made an immense effort to prevent himself from exclaiming: "I am the cousin you speak of, and you are no better than a fool."

A glance from Germaine once more prevented him from bursting forth into indignant protest, and besides, in pleading for Roch Ferrer she found an unexpected auxiliary. Arthur du Pomméval did not in the least desire that people should be arrested on account of the event which made him an heir. He knew that a criminal suit would delay his taking possession of the property, and that in the course of such a suit circumstances might arise which would throw doubt even upon the testimony of M. Grandminard.

"It seems to me," said he, "that the law will act very inconsiderately if it causes two men to be imprisoned on mere suspicion. I don't know the invisible cousin of Madame Vignemal, but I don't believe what is said about him. If he had entertained any evil designs against his relative he would have carried them out himself, and alone; and certainly he would not have applied to this poacher, who is incapable of committing a crime, so Dr. Subligny declares."

"The doctor is interested in him, and I think that he is wrong," grumbled M. Daudierne. "But we have talked over this ugly affair quite enough. Monsieur Pontac has sung an Algerian romance for us, and I won't venture to abuse of his goodness by asking for another; but I hope that he will tell us something about hunting in Africa. Did you ever kill any lions, my dear lieutenant?"

"Never, sir," replied Pontac. "I will even confess that I have little taste for sport. Since I have been at the Château de Bretteville I haven't fired a shot; but I should be delighted to go out with you and make a beginning, and if the ladies will be kind enough to fix a day for beating up the forest at La Breteche, I will give orders that all shall be made ready."

"It is for the duke to choose the day that will suit him," said M. du Pomméval, merely for the sake of reminding Roger that he considered himself to be one of the invited guests.

"Monsieur de Bretteville leaves the arrangements to me; I have full liberty to organise our party," replied Roger, quietly. "He merely begs that the ladies will excuse him from appearing. He is quite absorbed in his grief, and I should reproach myself if I left him alone any longer. I will now take leave of you, madame," added Roger, bowing to Germaine's mother, and making ready to depart.

"What! won't you give us the pleasure of your company at dinner?" exclaimed uncle Armand.

"Be kind enough to excuse me. Monsieur de Bretteville is waiting for me, and if we shoot this week, as he wishes, I shall have to make some arrangements at once."

"Shall we go shooting then on the day after to-morrow!" exclaimed Germaine, clapping her hands.

"Very well," said Pomméval.

Laurence nodded approvingly, and Madame Daudierne made no objection, although the plan did not suit her very well. At any other time she would have opposed it; but Germaine's marriage appeared to her so likely to take place, that she did not wish to deprive the lovers of a diversion which pleased them both, and which would afford them opportunity for freely conversing with one another without impropriety, since uncle Armand would be one of the party.

Roger had thus decided to shorten his visit because he guessed that Germaine wished that he should do so. He well understood the mute language of the eyes, which is even easier to interpret than that of flowers. The intelligent young girl well understood what Lieutenant Pontac must have suffered while M. Daudierne was talking, and accusing him unwittingly, and she feared that his patience would not last. The time had not come for speaking out. It would be better for him to do justice to himself when the representatives of the law realised that they were following the wrong track.

An attempt was certainly made to detain Roger; and then Pomméval, who did not wish to be outdone in politeness, offered his brougham to take him back to Bretteville. He even proposed to take him there himself. Roger refused everything, however, except to shake hands with his rival, and this he was forced to do. The party separated, agreeing to meet on the next day but one. The appointment for the hunt was made of one accord, and as a meeting-place, the verge of the forest of La Bretèche, at the foot of the Roche-de-Lémon, was chosen. The guests could go there in carriages, taking the main road which Germaine had failed to follow when Ralph ran away with her. It may be guessed that this arrangement was much more to the liking of the heroine of that happy escape.

Roger had come to La Germonière on foot. He had left his own horses in Tunis, and seldom rode those which the duke had placed at his disposal. Besides, La Germonière was but six miles from the château, and the officer was as good a pedestrian as a rider. He went away by the road which he preferred, that is to say, by crossing the garden and ascending the Beuvron slope to the gate of the park, which was not closed till night. The avenue led straight to the spot where the ferry-boat had been seen when the tempest was about to carry it away.

Roger had formerly seen this boat, which had been summarily built by

the owners, who rarely used it, and did not wish to put themselves to expense. He remembered what a worm-eaten craft it was, and he recollected the rough stone pillars which held, on either shore, the end of a cable worn out by the perpetual friction of the fastening rope. He easily guessed that Madame Vignemal had neglected to have it renewed, and not unnaturally wondered that it had held out so long.

The idea entered his mind to look at it as he passed by. So he approached the bank of the Beuvron, and saw that a fragment of broken rope remained fastened to the stone pillars, and lay hanging in the water. He drew it up, and on examining it, perceived that the hemp, rotten from dampness, had not been strong enough to resist the tug of a heavy boat impelled away by a violent current.

"It was a mere accident," he said to himself, "and one which might have been foreseen. This rope has perhaps been used for twenty years. If it broke, it was no fault of the vagabond whom the authorities suspect. And when I think that I, too, am under suspicion, I am tempted to believe that all these people are crazy, including Monsieur Daudierne, who repeats their stupid inventions. I remember now that Dr. Subligny asked me the other day whether I knew Roch Ferrer. He evidently attached no importance to the question, but I cannot remain under such a suspicion as this, however absurd it may be. It is a miracle that no one about here should have found out that Roger Pontac is a visitor at the Château de Bretteville. I shall not wait till I am looked for there. Monsieur Subligny wrote to me from Paris that he would return to Arcy to-morrow or the day after. As soon as he returns I shall ask him to take me at once to Monsieur Lestrigon, who has given so much *information* to Monsieur Daudierne, and we shall have a very plain talk together. I will put an end to all these false reports."

Night was now falling, and Roger did not tarry to look at the treacherous stream which had swallowed up the Vignemals, nor at the roofs of Le Fougeray, which were seen on the opposite shore, at the end of an undulating plain. He climbed the slope, and finding the park gate of La Germonière open, he took the pathway to Bretteville, still thinking of the incidents of his visit to the Daudiernes.

He had just found himself face to face with Arthur du Pomméval, who had taken a fortune away from him, and who aspired to marry Germaine. He had seen him, he had spoken to him, and he admitted that the heir had all that was needed to please Germaine's family. Between a millionaire, who was also a man of elegant appearance and manners, and himself, a poor officer, the struggle was by no means equal. But Roger did not despair as yet. Germaine had not told him that she loved him, but she certainly did not love M. du Pomméval, since she wished him to marry her sister. Mademoiselle Laurence had talked for some time with the handsome Arthur, while Germaine was accompanying the air so suitable for confidential talk. Was this a double omen, this private interview afforded to each of the two couples, and which neither the mother nor the uncle had interrupted? Pontac did not venture to believe that it was, but he felt that he could no longer control his fate. He was in love, and he was ready to sacrifice everything to his passion. War, military glory, advancement—all, were nothing to him now. The breath of passion had passed over his manhood's dreams, and it now seemed to him that he had not begun to live until the moment when the echoes of the Roche-de-Lémon had repeated to him the sweet name of Germaine.

The fancies which filled his brain prevented him from noticing such sounds as are usually heard on a road lined by trees and bushes; crackling boughs, dry leaves blowing about, and birds flying away. He walked rapidly onward without turning his head, and without letting his thoughts wander to the landscape revealed at every turn in the road. The Beuvron was not far off, and its dark waters mirrored the last rays of the sun of a clear autumnal day. The season was now drawing to a close.

Roger did not notice a black spot which appeared on the surface of the stream in the centre, and was approaching nearer and nearer to the right shore. He still walked on, and he was drawing near to the spot where, a few days previously, he had left Mademoiselle Daudierne on her way home, when a man suddenly appeared on the bank at ten paces from him. This time, the lieutenant, aroused from his dream by this apparition, stopped short and turned towards this man, who might perhaps have evil intentions. He was not timid, and his African campaigns had accustomed him to surprises; but he had learned, in making war upon the Arabs, that it is always best to be on the defensive when meeting a man suddenly face to face on a lonely road. He quickly produced a pretty little revolver, and after cocking it he walked quietly towards the almost phantom-like figure, which seemed to have emerged from the river itself.

Night was near, and surrounding objects began to be lost in the dimness of the evening; it was not easy to distinguish even their outlines. The appearance of the black figure against the grey sky was almost gigantic, and on taking a few more steps Roger saw that a tall young man stood before him, clad in skins, like a native of Siberia, and dripping with water.

This strange individual looked at him keenly, but did not stir. It seemed as if he did not care to leave the Beuvron banks, which were undoubtedly his line of retreat. His bearing was inoffensive, however, and he appeared to be merely an inquisitive person staring at a well-dressed man.

Roger did not need to make any great effort to recall what he had heard at La Germonière, and he soon guessed that this fellow was the poacher who had been accused of playing an evil part in the tragedy of the ferry-boat. He also remembered that this poacher was accused of having acted in accordance with a cousin of Madame Vignemal's, who had wished to inherit his relative's property. The unnamed cousin was himself Roger Pontac, and the opportunity was a good one for speaking to his pretended accomplice.

"Good evening, Roch," said he, coolly.

"Do you know me?" asked the gipsy.

"No; people say, though, that you know me."

"I! Just now I saw you looking at the broken rope when I was some distance off—"

"What! where were you?"

"In front of you, but on the other bank of the Beuvron."

"And now you are here! Did you cross the river? I didn't know that there was a bridge."

"I swam across."

"I see now that you are dripping from head to foot," remarked Roger, somewhat surprised. "You can't be of a chilly nature, and you are not afraid to risk your life."

"I am not afraid of anything."

"Not even of the law, it appears."

"If you mean the gamekeepers of the duke, or the rural guard of the commune, you are right," rejoined Roch Ferrer; "I don't care for them. They may look for me, but they will never catch me."

"But other people may; the police, for instance, and then you would be put in prison at Arcy."

"Why should I be put there?" was the poacher's retort. "I haven't killed any one, and I have never stolen."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Catching hares in the woods and carp in the river is not stealing."

"Go and ask Monsieur Daudierne what he thinks of your case."

"Have you come from La Germonière?"

"You know that I have, as you saw me on the slope at the end of the garden."

"Is this the first time that you have been there?"

"No; the second."

"Are you from Arcy?"

"You are too inquisitive, my fine fellow," replied Roger; "but I will answer your questions if you will answer mine. No, I am not from Arcy, but I belong to this district, and I know many of those who live here, Dr. Subligny, for instance."

"Dr. Subligny! Did he speak of me to you?"

"Yes, and he spoke well of you. But everybody does not think as he does. Monsieur Daudierne declares that you helped to drown the Vignemals."

"He knows that I didn't," rejoined Roch, energetically. "He was near at hand when I tried to save them."

"The public prosecutor wasn't there; and he accuses you also."

"That may be. He questioned me the other day at Le Fougeray, and I thought that he would have been glad to have me arrested, but he did not dare to do it—there was nothing against me."

"Do you know the heirs of the Vignemals?"

"The heirs?"

"Yes, the relations who will inherit the property of the wife and husband."

"I have heard that the husband had a nephew and that the wife had some cousins, but I never bothered myself about them."

"Then you don't know any one named Pontac?"

"I never even heard of him."

"Nor a Monsieur du Pomméval?"

"Ah! I have often seen *that* man. It is now six months since he began to call at La Germonière every day."

"Do you keep a watch, then, upon what goes on at Madame Daudierne's house?"

"No, I don't," said Roch; "but I see all those who are received at the château when they go in and come out."

"You have never seen me before?"

"I crossed the Beuvron to look more closely at you."

"You spy upon the visitors, it appears," remarked Roger. "Well, what do you think of me, now that you have seen me?"

"I think," said Roch, candidly, "that if you are Monsieur Subligny's friend you must be a good man."

"You are right; the doctor's friends are all good men, and he is Monsieur du Pomméval's friend as well as mine."

"Oh, as for Pomméval ! I hate him," exclaimed the poacher, savagely. "Bah ! what has he ever done to you ?"

"Nothing whatever. He doesn't even know that I exist. But I dislike him all the same."

"Then you won't be glad to hear that, owing to the death of his uncle, Monsieur Vignemal, he will be the owner of Le Fougeray."

"I don't care for that."

"And he will be more intimate than ever with the Daudierne family. He will end by marrying one of the young ladies."

"Which one ?" said the gipsy, eagerly.

"Ask him when you meet him," replied Roger, smiling. "He will tell you much better than I can, for I don't know Madame Daudierne's plans."

"Then," said Roch, timidly, "you haven't come here to marry ?"

"No, I'm not the heir, and no one would marry a poor devil who has nothing but his pay to depend upon."

"Ah, you are a soldier, then ?"

"A cavalry officer, and I began as a common soldier. You ought to do as I have done."

"I have thought of it more than once, but—I cannot."

"Why not ?" asked Roger. "You are of a good figure for riding on horseback ; you are strong, active, and bold ; you are used to hardship, and I'm sure that the life of a *chasseur d'Afrique* would suit you exactly."

"Later on, perhaps, but not now. I wish to be what I am."

"A poacher and a prowler ! You will be sorry for it, my lad ; the life which you lead will end badly, and sooner than you think. You are being watched, and one of these days you will be arrested. You will prove, I believe, that you had nothing to do with the accident which cost Monsieur and Madame Vignemal their lives, but you will be convicted of having hunted and fished without a license, and when you get out of prison you will begin again. A continuation of the same offences brings bad consequences. Believe me, Roch, you had better lose no more time. Come to see me at the Château de Bretteville. I will give you a letter for the officer who has command of the *dépôt* of my regiment at Castres, and money enough to take you there. You will enlist at once, and in six months you will be sent to my squadron. You will see the country, you can shoot as much as you like there, and it is very good fun, and next year you will be a corporal. The police agents who are looking for you will be nicely tricked."

"At the Château de Bretteville ? Are you the duke's son, then ?" asked Roch.

"No, not even his relation ; but I live at his château. I will wait for you there to-morrow, and if you care to consult Dr. Subigny before making up your mind, we will go together to see him at Arcy."

Roger Pontac had forgotten one of the suggestions made by the ex-army surgeon, who knew what lay under the facts better than he did, and who had advised him to avoid the Beuvron outlaw. Moreover, he no longer thought of M. Arnand Daudierne's absurd suspicions.

He did not admit that a French officer could be seriously accused of having paid a rascal to drown a cousin whose heir he was ; and now that he had spoken to Roch Ferrer, he saw that the young poacher was a bold fellow of irregular life, but incapable of so cowardly a crime. He did not ask himself why this independent being was so desirous of remaining upon

Madame Daudierne's grounds, or why he had crossed the river to stare at a gentleman who came from the garden of La Germonière. He only thought of putting him in the right path by opening an honourable career to him.

"You will come, won't you?" he asked.

But Roch, instead of replying, turned on his heels to plunge into the water again. He leaped into the Beuvron, and began to swim rapidly towards the opposite shore.

"Well!" exclaimed Roger, in amazement, "that fellow has no vocation for the military profession. It is a pity! He would have made a capital soldier; but the dickens take me if I can guess why he crossed the Beuvron expressly to place himself in my way! I forgot to ask him why, and after all the questions he asked me I am half inclined to believe that he is watching all the gentlemen who go to La Germonière. He asked me if I went there as a suitor, and he hates Pomméval. He may have fallen in love—that's likely enough—with one of the young ladies. I can't help it, however, and I did my best to induce him to go away. But I shall warn Mademoiselle Germaine, and I am sure that she will approve of what I said to him."

Roger was right, but he could not guess that Laurence Daudierne was about to play a part in the domestic drama in which he was "first lover."

VI.

THE dinner was always lively at La Germonière, whether there were guests or not. The table was abundantly spread, the cooking good, and, what was still better, all the family had good appetites, a good digestion, and few cares. Numerous enough to suffice for themselves, they took pleasure in joking with one another, and the conversation never flagged.

Uncle Armand talked with ease and enjoyed his glass. He had filled his sister-in-law's cellar with good wines, for she knew nothing about selecting famous growths, and as he had seen a great deal, and had a retentive memory, he was never at a loss for a good anecdote.

Young Alfred did all he could to imitate his uncle, but did not succeed. At the third glass he could not have told whether he was drinking good wine or bad, and he often plunged into questionable Parisian stories which led to his being called to order at once. He, nevertheless, did his share in the pleasant chatting, for his sisters were amused by his peculiarities, and uncle Armand did not hesitate to make fun of him whenever he spoke of his conquests.

Germaine was always disposed to laugh: Laurence, although more seriously inclined, was not sad, however, and their mother, among other good qualities, had that of perfect good temper. Thus time flew by gaily in the pretty dining-room of the lady of the château, who well knew how to arrange her abode both inside and out, for she overlooked everything from the garden to the barn.

Madame Daudierne, setting aside the provincial custom, never gave grand dinners. She did not send out invitations two weeks ahead, and did not consider herself obliged to give her guests four courses. Visitors came when they pleased, and were always well served. The ladies of Arcy who did not follow this system, and for good reasons, thought her too unceremonious, and declared that she did little honour to her wealth.

They stayed to dinner, however, when urged to do so, but only to see what a Parisian dinner was like, and uncle Armand, who was fond of jesting, would unfailingly tell them the most ridiculous stories as to the customs of Parisian society in which they did not move. When he wished to vex them, he would amuse himself by declaring that he would invite the new sub-prefect, whom the good society of the little town had declined receiving. So much for the lady visitors; as for the gentlemen, they stayed to dinner without being urged to do so, especially the younger ones, who knew that they would spend a pleasant evening.

When only those who were in the habit of visiting La Germonière were assembled at table there, all the citizens of Arcy and their failings were reviewed. But jokes were not carried too far, and when they included the guests, those who were victimised were the first to laugh. Arthur du Pomméval was often one of these, for he was received on the footing of intimacy, and in the earlier times he made himself agreeable to all who came. He was thought well of for preferring quiet evenings to baccarat and racing. It must be added that he was now reaping the benefit of his position as an untiring suitor, and that he sustained his difficult part with ease and success. He had so behaved as to allow it to be seen that he would think it only too great an honour to be admitted into the family, and that if he did not openly declare himself as accepted, it was from pure diffidence. By not declaring himself to either one of the young girls, he had taken the best way to please both. The younger, who had no thought of marrying him, found him as agreeable and entertaining as could be desired. She thought that his presence made all entertainments more successful, and that there were no pleasant dances when he was absent. Her elder sister did not deny this assertion.

The tragic death of the Vignemals had changed everything, however. The heir had been led to decide, and as is always the case with those who do so suddenly, he had pleased no one. Laurence, wounded to the heart, could not forgive him for having deceived her, and Germaine, too clear-sighted, did not value the tardy preference with which he had taken it into his head to honour her. Even Madame Daudierne's peace was troubled by his sudden change of mind. She felt almost angry with Pomméval for having, herself, mistaken his feelings and for having attributed intentions to him which he had not entertained.

Uncle Armand alone was not dissatisfied by his favourite's choice, although he could not have told why. Alfred on his side had no fixed opinion on the subject, but congratulated himself on the prospect of having a brother-in-law who "knew what life was," and lent money easily. It mattered little to him whether so obliging a friend married Laurence or Germaine.

In the new situation, created by Dr. Subigny's official visit with a proposal of marriage, Roger Pontac came to be looked upon simply as a pleasant country neighbour, a valuable recruit in the leisure of a winter stay. Everybody liked him. M. Armand Daudierne praised him to the skies. Madame Daudierne spoke of his perfect manners and reserved bearing. Laurence admired him, although she had noticed him but little and listened to him still less. Alfred intended to dazzle him by his exploits as a sportsman and rider, and Pomméval valued him as an acquaintance, on account of the interest which the Duke de Bretteville showed him. Germaine did not say all that these enthusiasts said, but she thought all the more, and none of them knew what she thought.

It may easily be believed that on the day when the young officer first met Arthur du Pomméval at La Germonière he was much talked of after his departure. Arthur had remained. His mourning admitted of his passing a quiet evening in visiting a house where there was no one else but the family, and now that he was almost a relative, he wished to make the most of the permission granted him, as, in such a case, to all suitors. In vain, however, did he attempt to be agreeable. Strange to say, on this occasion the dinner was not a gay one. Germaine was as lively as usual, and her mother, uncle, and brother did all that they could to make the occasion a pleasant one. But a single false note will spoil a chord, and Laurence was the false note in question, although she evinced but moderate bitterness. She merely uttered occasional words that were scarcely complimentary to the dandies of the town, Pomméval especially. She praised the merit of the daring men who owed their fortunes to themselves, and did not rely on that of others.

She, indeed, said so much of this kind that M. Armand Daudierne began to think that Lieutenant Pontac had made a deep impression on her, and he thereupon tried to jest about romantic ideas. Madame Daudierne, who knew her daughter better, attached less importance to what she said, but she saw that the poor girl only spoke like this to hide great suffering, and almost began to reproach herself for having permitted, if not encouraged, M. du Pomméval's treacherous change. She even thought somewhat of withdrawing the consent which had been obtained from her, in a manner by surprise, and she also thought of bringing back the frivolous heir to his first love ; but the culprit did not appear to be repentant. He flirted openly with the younger sister, and it was easy to see that he thought himself in a position to choose, and did not regret having chosen.

Germaine so managed matters that it was almost impossible to find out whether she cared for the attentions of her neighbour at table, or simply took pleasure in encouraging him so that he might utter some foolish compliment or be absurdly gallant ; and when they all rose to return into the drawing-room, Pomméval was somewhat out of countenance. There was no talk of music. It was all very well for a lieutenant from Africa to sing Arab airs. Arthur's good fortune kept him from the piano, and when the mourner had exhausted all ordinary topics, and everybody had praised the Duke de Bretteville's courtesy and settled matters as to the great day at La Breteche, the affianced lover felt that he must needs take his leave.

No one attempted to detain him, and they all parted pleasantly. Uncle Armand and young Alfred went with him to his carriage, and Madame Daudierne having left the room to give orders to her maid, the two sisters found themselves alone.

"You cut up the handsome Arthur without mercy," said Germaine, laughingly, "and you did well. He deserved it. I did not want to help you, but one of these days I shall join in, and you will see that we shall succeed, you and I together, in bringing him back to the right path."

"He took that which suited him," replied Laurence, "and I would not divert him from it."

"Then I shall, big sister !" said Germaine. "I won't tell you how, for it is a secret which I shall keep for a few days longer yet."

"As long as you please. I don't wish to guess it, and I shall not do Monsieur du Pomméval the honour of noticing him."

"You are right. That wouldn't be the way to bring him back. Now, you love him, and——"

Laurence made a gesture of protest, but Germaine gaily resumed: "And I do not. You may think that I am feigning. Suppose I told you that I loved some one else, what then?"

At this moment Madame Daudierne re-appeared, and uncle Armand soon followed her. Alfred had already gone to bed to make up for a night spent at the baccarat table, and none of the others cared to sit up much longer, although it was but ten o'clock.

"Our friend is certainly a charming young man," remarked M. Daudierne, by way of saying something.

"Whom are you speaking about, uncle?" asked Germaine, maliciously.

"About Arthur, of course! The hussar officer is very agreeable, too, but he is a mere bird of passage, while Pomméval remains forever the lord of Le Fougeray."

"He isn't the lord yet. His possession depends upon Roch Ferrer. If the gipsy declared that Madame Vignemal still lived when he left her upon the bank, the inheritance would vanish into smoke, so you said yourself."

"Never fear, little one," rejoined her uncle, "nothing will happen like that, and if the gipsy were even paid to invent falsehoods, no one would give attention to such a fellow."

"So be it!" said Germaine. "Let's go to sleep, then. I shall not dream of our poor neighbour's money."

After this declaration, upon which no one commented, they all took leave of each other for the night and repaired to their respective rooms, with the exception of Alfred, who had a room downstairs, so as to be free to slip out at night-time, when the fancy struck him to mount Ralph and ride to Arcy to play cards. The whole family slept on the second floor. Madame Daudierne's room was between those of her two daughters, but it did not communicate with them.

The druggist who built the house had arranged it like a barracks. An endless corridor, with dozens of doors, extended through the building from side to side, and ended on one hand at the main staircase, and at the other at the servants' stairs. It was certainly convenient, as regarded going about the house.

Uncle Armand's room overlooked the court-yard, while the windows of the mother and daughters faced the garden.

"At last I can weep!" said Laurence, after pushing her bolt. And letting herself fall on to a chair, she burst into tears.

Those who had seen her at table would never have supposed that she could now be sobbing like a child in her own apartment, on reaching which she had at once given way to her feelings. So long as lasted the cruel test which her false position had brought about, she had been able to bear up. She did not wish her sorrow to be divined. No doubt her mother and uncle had noticed that her self-love was wounded, but they did not think that her heart was sore. Pomméval himself had only seen the effect of very pardonable pique in her language and manner. He thought that she was but vexed, and would soon get over the loss of him as a lover.

Germaine, however, was not deceived; but Germaine had a plan of her own, and thought it useless to give attention to the sufferings of a heart which she hoped to cure soon. The deserted girl was thus reduced to

hiding her tears, for she was proud and did not wish to be pitied. Her upright nature revolted against the treachery from which she suffered, and rebelled against the position in which society places women in such a case. She would rather have died of grief than have tried to regain the affection of a man who had abandoned her, and she did not even allow him to believe that she considered he had trifled with her. Deceit and coquetry were not in her nature.

And yet, while Roger Pontac sang in Arabic of the "tuneful bird" flying to the "well beloved," a blight seemed to fall upon her life. Until that decisive moment she had been able to converse very freely with the forgetful Arthur and to delude herself. M. Subligny had called and had asked for the hand of Germaine for the Vignemals' heir, but this step had been so unexpected, that all those who were concerned in the matter had asked themselves whether it were premeditated or merely the result of passing vexation. It might be thought that M. du Pomméval was annoyed that Laurence should have shown such little pleasure at receiving his attentions. The place which he held in society at Arcy and his successes in Paris had given him a good opinion of himself, and he might have imagined that if he wished to win the elder sister, he ought to pretend to court the younger one. Such devices succeed with some women, and he had perhaps imagined that Laurence was like some others whom he had known.

However, the affront was serious, and the noble girl whom he confounded with heartless beings had keenly felt it; still, neither her mother nor sister had seemed to attach any importance to this abrupt change in Arthur's wooing. Madame Daudierne had given an evasive reply, Germaine had merely laughed at the proposal, and in repeating the doctor's words to Laurence, they had both asked her what she thought of the new situation, brought about by M. Subligny's embassy.

If Laurence had a lofty soul, she was also extremely sensitive; still she thought it unworthy of her to complain, and she wished before anything else to hear what M. du Pomméval would say, and then force him to confess that he had broken his vows. She wished, indeed, to acquaint him unreservedly with the contempt that she felt for his conduct, and then leave him to his regrets. Urged by her mother for a reply, Laurence had made the mistake of declaring that M. du Pomméval was free to marry as he pleased, and Madame Daudierne had been satisfied with this vague answer. The poor girl had thus prepared a still greater sorrow for herself.

All was over now. The unfaithful lover, forced to speak, had scarcely defended himself, and his awkward replies had deprived the forsaken girl of her last illusion. She had nothing further to expect from this country Lovelace, who changed with his fortunes, and who, in view of making a match suited to the mediocrity of his means—prior to the ferry-boat accident—had not hesitated to feign a passion which he had not felt. In five minutes Laurence realised all this. She divined Pomméval's sordid purpose, petty ambition, and disposition to trifle with his own conscience, and she then decided that he did not deserve to be regretted. She reproached herself for having loved him, and dreaded lest she should still feel that she had any love left for so despicable a being.

"No," she murmured, as she sat in her room wiping away her tears, "I love him no longer. I hate him, I execrate him, and I will be revenged! I don't want him to deceive Germaine as he has deceived me. She has just said that she does not love him, and she never speaks falsely, and yet she welcomes him, and does not discourage him. She did not even protest

when our mother said that he had asked for her hand. Can I believe what she tells me, that she wishes to bring him back to me? If she is sincere she must be mad. She might refuse him, but, however daring he may be, he would not venture to make love to me again. He will see that I do not love him now that I know him as he really is. Who can tell whether Germaine may not be misled by the part which he so unblushingly plays? Who knows whether he may not succeed in persuading her that he has always been in love with her? Why shouldn't she prove as credulous as I was? Just now, she seemed anxious to make me believe that her heart belonged to another. That cannot be! To whom could she have given her heart? All the young men about here seem ridiculous in her eyes. Could it be that officer whom she accompanied on the piano? That's impossible!—she scarcely knows him. She merely said that to comfort me, and there is nothing to prevent her falling into the trap which the traitor will set for her. She will fall into it all the more readily, as they will all urge her into it, excepting myself. My mother, my uncle, and my brother approve of Monsieur du Pomméval's intentions, and will support them. Germaine will resist, no doubt, but, worn out at last, she will end by yielding.

"Heaven is my witness, that if I thought he really loved her, if I thought he would not make her the most miserable of women, I would forget affront to myself, and I would sacrifice everything for my sister's sake, everything, even my resentment; yes, I would forgive Monsieur du Pomméval for preferring Germaine. But in this marriage he only sees the gratification of a whim. He is rich, and wishes to have the satisfaction of marrying a girl whom he considers prettier than I am, and when the fancy passes he will cease to care for her, just as he has ceased to care for me. No! no! It shall not be! I will not have it so!" exclaimed Laurence, rising.

The room in which the young girl slept was hung with light grey paper; a wood fire burned in the chimney-place, below a white marble mantelpiece, and the flame of a night-lamp shed a soft light over the young girl's virginal couch, at the foot of which lay a big Danish hound, a pet of both the sisters, who allowed him to sleep in whichever room it pleased him to enter. As a rule, Belt, as this spotted specimen of an almost extinct breed was called, mounted guard over Laurence and Germaine alternately.

That night he was to guard Laurence, and she must, indeed, have been lost in thought not to notice his approaches. Belt, finally discouraged, had at last laid down upon a swan-skin, but every now and then he raised his head to watch his young mistress' movements.

She walked slowly up and down the room where she had spent so many happy hours before she had known Arthur du Pomméval. Less expansive than her sister, she had always been very fond of solitude, and had loved to shut herself up in this fresh, charming nest, where no one came to disturb her. She had remained there during entire days, drawing from old engravings or painting from nature the flowers which she herself cultivated in some beautiful garden-stands, the gift of her uncle Armand. Ofttimes had she leant from her window and become absorbed in the contemplation of the lovely view. In the foreground rose up the tall trees of the park; beyond, the Beuvron gleamed like crystal, and, across its waters, far above the slate roof of Le Fougeray, a chain of blue hills limited the horizon. Laurence was not romantic, like her sister; she had no love of adventure; meetings in woods had no charm for her, and such an incident

as that which had occurred at the Roche-de-Lémon would not have pleased her at all. Her poetry was meditative; she had her own ideal of happiness, and it differed from Germaine's. She had held her heart in reserve for fear of loving lightly, and before bestowing it she had wished to make sure that her love was returned. It was only when she had studied the character of Arthur du Pomméval, and thought she could understand it, that she had replied to the very marked advances of the king of Arcy fashion.

Pomméval pleased her, but she wished to try him, and the test had in the first stage been favourable to the fortunate man. Never, whatever he might now say, could Laurence have supposed that he felt aught than a respectful and discreet love for her. Still less could she have suspected that he was thinking of Germaine. Thus, little by little, she had grown to love him, without thinking of blinding herself as to his faults. She saw that these existed, and she was aware that he was wanting in energy, regularity of conduct, and firmness, and that, if left to himself, he would probably end as his father had done—that is, by ruining himself, thanks to his vain wish to shine in the society he belonged to. But she overlooked these defects, because she also believed him to be sincere and true; perhaps she was even glad that they existed, as she hoped to cure them. She flattered herself that he would sacrifice his fancies to her, and thought that she would derive great pleasure by working a change in him. A more faultless suitor would not have held out this prospect which is always tempting to women.

Pomméval, besides, led Laurence to believe that he longed for domestic life, winters in Paris and summers at La Germonière. He ridiculed the false pleasures and empty lives of the young fools who do not understand that true happiness is to be found in marriage. And as he had been sincere at the time when he thus spoke, Laurence had believed in his professions, and had said to herself that she would marry no other man but him. She was waiting for an occasion which would admit of his making her a proposal, and she was even willing to supply the necessary opportunity, and had intended telling everything to her mother, whom she regretted not having consulted all along.

But a single day had sufficed to scatter all these illusions. The dream had vanished. Laurence had fallen from a giddy height, and the only feeling which remained to her was the wish to punish the traitor who had thus reduced her to despair. "Yes," she murmured, "I will make him repent his falsehood. Germaine will delude him by promises which will lead to nothing, and will end by dismissing him. He will only reap the shame of having deceived me, and his pride will suffer. But that is not enough. I will strike at what he holds most dear, and deprive him of the fortune which has perverted his heart. He thinks that he may act as he likes now that chance has offered him millions. If he fell back into the petty position from which an accident has taken him, he would feel all the bitterness of his punishment. The inheritance?—he shall lose the inheritance! although my uncle says that it will not even be disputed."

Laurence had gone to the window, and she gazed absently at the lawn in front of the house. The night was clear enough to enable her to see the Beuvron, whence rose a cloud of foggy vapour.

"Yes," she resumed, "there is the gipsy, who saw Madame Vignemal upon the river bank. Was she indeed dead? He alone can tell that; and if he said that she still lived when he found her, all would again be doubt. My uncle declared just now that Monsieur du Pomméval had nothing to

fear from Roch Ferrer's testimony ; but if I choose Roch will speak out. Did he not tell me at the Bois-du-Tertre that he was ready to do anything I ordered him to do ? It rests with me to summon him, he was waiting for the signal, and if I place a light at my window he will come to the bank near the garden.

Laurence had grown excited as she thought of all this ; and, perhaps, to leave herself no chance for further reflection, she caught hold of the lamp which stood beside her bed, and placed it upon the window-sill.

The Danish hound rose and rubbed his head against Laurence's hand as she set the lamp down. It seemed as though he understood the importance of this simple act. His mild and intelligent eyes seemed to say to his mistress : " I am ready to follow you everywhere, and to defend you from everybody."

She perfectly understood that by making the signal which the poacher waited for she had entered upon a dangerous path, and that this first step might lead her further than she wished to go. To have aught to do with Roch Ferrer, the insolent gipsy, who had the audacity to love her, was to compromise herself. To go to the meeting-place he had assigned would be worse than giving the signal. It would be an abandonment of all the rules which a young lady usually conforms to. However giddy Germaine might be, she would not have acted like this.

It is true that Germaine could not judge of Roch Ferrer's character. She had seen him but for a moment on the evening of the accident. She had not, like her sister, heard his protestations of humble and passionate devotion. He had not said to Germaine : " You may dispose of me as of a slave. My life belongs to you." The younger girl did not know that the outlaw was capable of feeling respect for a woman and obeying her blindly.

" Down there, upon the verge of the Bois-du-Tertre," said Laurence to herself, " he might have carried me away, for I was at his mercy, and I lost my head when he seized hold of my horse's bridle ; my sister was being borne away by Ralph, and my uncle was far off. Roch could have done this before any one could have prevented it. But it was sufficient for me to look at him to make him lower his eyes, and to order him to leave me, for him to disappear. I have nothing to fear from this enthusiast. At the first scornful word that I might utter, should he forget what I am and what he is, he would fall upon his knees and beg my pardon. Besides, the Beuvron is at the verge of the garden, two hundred paces from here. If I called out I should be heard from the house. Moreover, I shall take Belt with me. You will take care of me, Belt, will you not ?"

The Danish hound showed his white teeth, and growled softly ; it was as though he had said in his canine language : " Rely on me !"

Laurence reasoned thus to give herself the courage she needed, but she was well aware that this nocturnal excursion was dangerous folly, and that she risked her reputation by venturing alone, at such an hour, on a deserted path, to talk with a vagabond who braved the law and the police.

" I shall expose myself uselessly," she thought. " Roch can't pass all his nights in watching my window. He hasn't seen the signal. How could I have imagined that he would be at a given moment on the banks of the Beuvron. The revenge which I had planned escapes me. No one will trouble Monsieur du Pomméval's security."

Laurence, already in despair again, was now about to leave the window, when suddenly she saw a light shining at the end of the garden. It was but a luminous point, but it rose and fell alternately.

"Ah ! he has seen my lamp, and he replies that he is there," she murmured. "I was mistaken. He is waiting for me, and he is ready. He keeps his word. He would give me his life if I asked it, and can I reward his heroic devotion by letting him imagine that I merely gave the signal so as to put him to the test? Ought I to refrain from going to meet him now ? It would be almost an authorisation to him to come and call to me under my window, or even to scale the wall to reach me, and he would do so, for nothing stays him. If my uncle surprised him trying to open the door, he would fire upon him and kill him ; and if he met him in the house, he would suspect me of having let him in. It will be far better to meet danger than await it here. Come, Belt, come !"

She hastily withdrew the lamp, lit a small lantern which often served her in the evenings to cross the hall, where the wind blew very hard, and threw a cloak over her shoulders. She then slipped out of her room and went stealthily down the servants' staircase. The dog walked noiselessly before her. He seemed to have guessed that it was desirable he should not be heard.

The walls were thick, and there was a matting on the floor. The staircase led down to a little door which opened into the garden, and the key of which was always left in the lock. Laurence could thus go out without rousing any one. The most difficult part was done. She had but to follow the right hand pathway which led straight to the river. A walk of five minutes was all that she need take. She no longer hesitated. Her mind was fully made up, and she did not feel afraid, for she felt sure that Roch would not misconstrue her motive in going to meet him.

The ambient light which she had espied from her window was no longer to be seen, but its disappearance did not disturb Mademoiselle Daudierne. Roch had said to her at the Bois-du-Tertre : "Come to the rise and walk to the end of the tamarisk hedge." She remembered his words, and did not doubt that she should find him at the spot he had indicated.

Belt already walked with his head in the air, and just as his mistress reached the top of the slope above the Beuvron, he started off without barking. "He must know him," said Laurence to herself.

The circumstance was fortunate, for a gardener or a keeper would have immediately appeared if the dog had barked. Belt presently returned, however, still noiselessly, although he gamboled round about her, and then darting once more to the slope, he again vanished in the shade and again returned, as if to say : "I have found some one whom I know, and I will bring him to you."

"His instinct does not deceive him," thought Laurence. "He knows that this man, who has probably often fondled him, will not harm us."

Before going further, however, she stopped to listen for a moment and look about her. The silence of the night was unbroken, except by the wind sighing among the tamarisks. There was no light in any window of the château. Every one was evidently asleep.

Mademoiselle Daudierne had scarcely gone ten paces further when she saw Belt stop, with his head towards the river. She still advanced, calling softly to the dog, who did not stir, and by the light of the lantern which she carried, she saw Roch Ferrer leaning against an oak near the tamarisk hedge.

"I have come," said she, "because I have faith in you," and her voice trembled a little.

"Thanks," replied the poacher, who was even more agitated than the

young girl herself. "I did not think that you remembered me. Now, whatever you ask, I am well rewarded, as you have not forgotten that I am ready to do anything to serve you. The people hereabouts hate and fear me. You don't fear me, however, and you speak kindly to me. That is more than enough to pay for my life, if you wish to have it."

"I ask nothing like that," replied Laurence. "Let me explain to you, in the first place, why you inspired me with confidence. Monsieur Subligny answers for you, and I should already have asked you to come to the house had you not talked so foolishly the other day at the Bois-du-Tertre."

"I am mad, I know that I am!"

"I forgive you, for I hope that you will forget all that. If I did not hope so, I should not be here. I don't believe those who speak ill of you, and I see that I am right. If you were wicked, my dog wouldn't have let you come near me."

The poacher was now calm, both in language and manner. Roch Ferrer was as Laurence had believed him to be when she had first seen him.

"Any one would think that my good Belt knew you," she said.

"He comes to see me every evening before going back to La Germonière," replied the gipsy, gently. "Animals always like me."

"To see you? Does he know where you live, then? We do not know."

"He knows," replied the poacher, "that I never leave your garden at night-time. He looks for me, and finds me there. But he has been obliged, for seven days past, to swim across the Beuvron to dine with me."

"Then you are living on the left bank?"

"Yes," said Roch Ferrer, "just in front of your grounds. There are thickets there, from which everything that goes on at the château can be seen. I could tell you at what hour your window is lighted up every night, and when your light goes out."

"I now understand how it was that you answered the signal of my lamp so quickly, for it was you, I suppose, who waved that lantern."

"It isn't a lantern," replied Roch, "but a torch which I made myself. There are plenty of pine trees on the lands at Le Fougeray, and I slit them to draw out the rosin. You see that what people say of me is true. I take what belongs to others."

"That is very wrong," said Laurence, warmly; "and if you wish to see me again, you must live very differently. But it is time for me to tell you why I came. I have something to ask you for—some information."

Roch cast down his eyes, and made a gesture of disappointment.

"You were present when our poor neighbours, the people of Le Fougeray died," resumed Laurence.

"Yes," replied the poacher, raising his head quickly. "I was close by when the rope of the boat gave way."

"And you plunged into the water to save them," said Mademoiselle Daudierne. "You even found Madame Vignemal's body, so I was told, but unfortunately the water swept it away again. I know that; but I wish to know whether everything happened precisely as you stated to my uncle and Dr. Subligny. I thought that you, perhaps, had some motive—some reason for not telling them everything," added Laurence.

Roch started, and looked fixedly at the young girl.

"Oh!" she resumed, "I have no right to question you, and you need not reply."

"I have sworn to obey you. Speak, I will tell you all."

"Well, then," said Laurence, "I thought that Madame Vignemal was perhaps still alive when you found her, and that, fearing that you might be reproached for having left her on the bank, you allowed it to be supposed that you imagined she was dead, whereas in reality you were certain that she was not."

"The magistrate who questioned me at Le Fougeray spoke just as you do now," muttered the gipsy, visibly disturbed.

"And you persisted in your first declaration? That was quite natural, but you are not replying to a judge; it is to a friend who asks you for a sincere confession. Was Madame Vignemal still alive?"

"Yes," replied Roch Ferrer, who this time spoke without the least hesitation.

"You are sure of this?"

"Now—yes, I am sure of it."

"Why do you say 'now'? Did you doubt it when you saw her?"

"I did not doubt it, but I had no proof of it. Now, I have a proof."

"Can you furnish that proof?" anxiously exclaimed Mademoiselle Daudierne.

"To you, yes," replied Roch Ferrer; "I can prove to you that Madame Vignemal must have recovered consciousness while I went to seek help at the château."

"Well, then, prove to me that this was so," said Laurence, eagerly. "Explain yourself better. How can you possibly know what took place on the bank of the Beuvron when you were not there?"

"Will you believe me if I explain?"

"Yes, I will believe you. Why should you lie, when you need only remain silent?" asked Laurence.

"I should be silent if any one else questioned me, for if I made the avowal I now make to you, to any other person, it would cost me dear. But I told you that if you asked me for my life I would lay it down for you. I give it to you now, for after having heard me, you will have a horror of me, and that will kill me."

Laurence turned pale. She had not expected this declaration, and she understood its meaning. Plainly enough, the suspicions of the public prosecutor were well founded, as uncle Armand had said. Roch Ferrer had committed a crime. And he was now about to confess this crime to Mademoiselle Daudierne. She was looking for an agent to punish Arthur du Pomméval for his double dealing, and she had come upon a murderer. The idea of becoming his confidant filled her with loathing, and she now only thought of cutting the conversation short for fear of hearing what she wished to remain ignorant of.

"No, no!" she cried, "tell me no more! You have said too much already!"

"Too much, and not enough," replied the poacher promptly at once. "If I tell you no more you will think me an assassin. You must know all. You shall judge me afterwards, and if you condemn me, I will execute your sentence myself without a murmur."

The situation had now changed in its aspect. Laurence could no longer refuse to listen to Roch Ferrer since he asked to justify himself, and she began to hope that he was not so guilty as she had believed, on hearing him begin with so alarming a preamble.

"Speak!" said she.

"I did not kill them," Roch replied, in a steady tone, "but I might have prevented them from dying, and I did not do so."

"What! My uncle and Monsieur Subligny told us that you threw yourself into the water, and that you plunged several times——"

"That is true," rejoined Roch. "But before the accident took place I was hidden in the thicket a few steps from the path which they took to enter the boat. They did not see me, but I saw them, and I saw that they were about to cross the river. I had only to appear and warn them."

"But you could not foresee the accident which happened to them."

"Unfortunately I could. I knew that the rope of the boat was rotten, and that it would not hold out against the current. I knew that so well, that for a month past I haven't left the shores. If any peasant of the district, or one of your servants, had appeared, and had been about to enter the boat, I should have prevented his doing so."

"If you had told us this, we would have had it repaired."

"I was not afraid that any harm would happen to you or yours. The boat was fastened to the opposite bank; it could only be used by the people from Le Fougeray, and I was at variance with them."

"At variance with them!—because they forbade your shooting on their grounds?" exclaimed Laurence. "And was it to revenge yourself for the action of their keepers that you let them die!"

"No," said the poacher, eagerly; "had it been but that I should have stopped them and told them of their danger."

"What had they done to you, then?"

"Nothing. But when I saw that they were going to La Germonière I thought——"

"What?"

"I thought that Monsieur Vignemal was going to ask you to marry his nephew." This reply, more unexpected than any of the rest, deeply troubled Laurence. She felt that Roch was telling her the truth, and she said to herself, unwillingly, that the insane love which the gipsy felt for her was the indirect cause of a great misfortune.

"His nephew!" she stammered. "You know him, then?"

"I have seen him going to the château almost every day, and everybody declared that you intended to marry him. The Vignemals never visited you, and I imagined that they were going to make this visit for the purpose of asking you to marry that man Pomméval. I would have killed him rather than suffered him to become your husband. And I let the Vignemals go to their destruction. It was a crime, I know——"

"A crime that the law does not reach," interrupted Laurence, "but which your conscience will ever reproach you with."

"I repented at the moment," rejoined Roch, eagerly, "and I sprang into the Beuvron to try to save them."

"It is true, then, that you made every effort to rescue them?" asked the young girl, who was much affected.

"Your uncle himself does not doubt that. He found me dripping wet, shivering with cold, exhausted, in fact, by a twenty minutes' struggle with a current that nothing can resist. At the moment when the rope broke, when I saw the servant desert his employers in so cowardly a manner, I could not resist my impulse. I forgot the accusations of their gamekeeper and their nephew's purposes, and I only thought of helping them as they seemed about to perish. I could have brought them ashore if the boat had not capsized. You know how it happened. Monsieur Daudierne and

Monsieur Subligny must have told you what I said to them, and I declare that it was the simple truth."

"But not the whole truth," remarked Laurence, "for you now say that Madame Vignemal still breathed when you saw her, and yet you allowed it to be thought that she was dead."

"You guessed why I did so," declared Roch. "I feared that they would reproach me, which I indeed deserved, as I once again yielded to a bad impulse."

"I am afraid to understand you," said Laurence in a low tone, and overcome by this fresh confession. "The poor woman still lived when she was thrown ashore, and instead of placing her out of reach of the current you threw her back again——"

"Into the river? Ah, no!" cried the poacher, "if I had done that I should indeed be an assassin. But I did not do so. I only touched Madame Vignemal in such a way as to help her. I disengaged her feet which had caught in the roots of a willow—that one down there, just below us. I placed her upon the shore, which sloped down to the water. I knelt beside her, and I felt that her heart still beat. Her right hand was clutching some object which she had taken a firm hold of. I tried to open it. I could not, and then I called out. No one came, however. I did not know what to do to bring her to life again. I thought for an instant of carrying her in my arms, but I could not do so, for she was very heavy, and I was quite exhausted. On the other hand, I did not care to remain beside the body, which I was afraid of. It seemed to me that it was about to rise up and curse me, and I felt almost tempted to throw it back into the water. I resolved to leave it and to run to the house for help."

"When you returned, then, the body had disappeared? Had the current borne it away?"

"The current could not have borne it away. I left the poor woman two yards from the water. When I saw that she was no longer there, I asked myself whether the fiend had not carried her off, and not knowing what to reply to the gentleman who questioned me, I told them that I had only half withdrawn the body from the water, that it was firmly held by the feet, and that the roots which had caught it having given way, it had, no doubt, gone on with the stream. It was only the following day that I learned what had happened during my absence."

"On the following day!" repeated Laurence. "All that you tell me is so very strange that I don't know whether I ought to believe you or not."

"I swear to you that it is all true," said Roch, in an impressive voice. "When I left La Germonière I returned to the hill. I passed the rest of the night there, and, when the day dawned, I closely examined the spot where Madame Vignemal had been cast ashore. The traces which the body had left on the damp soil were still plainly visible, and I had no trouble in discovering that Madame Vignemal had revived, that she had dragged herself on her knees to the top of the slope, and that when there she had attempted to stand upright. Her feet must have slipped, and, in order to save herself, she clutched hold of a tamarisk bough which broke in her hand, and she fell backwards. The declivity is very steep, and she must have rolled to the edge of the water, have fallen in, and this time was drowned."

"You state this as though you had seen it. But this is mere supposition, as you were not there."

"It is just the same. Both feet had left deep marks in the soil at the

moment when she slipped. The broken bough showed that it had just been snapped off."

"And you did not go at once to my uncle to tell him of your discovery," asked Laurence.

"I did not know that it would interest you."

"It proves nothing, especially now that the traces have disappeared."

"Would you like to find out whether the event happened just as I have told you?" asked Roch.

"Yes; for I greatly doubt it."

"Will you believe me if I show you an object which Madame Vignemal held tightly in her hand when the boat capsized, and which I found under the tamarisk, fifteen feet above the edge of the water?"

"What was this object?"

"A leather case, secured by a lock, and looking like a portfolio. She carried it in her bosom, and when she saw that she was about to be drowned she unfastened her dress to take it out. She had not let go of it when she was dashed upon the shore. But she let it fall in attempting to clutch hold of the tamarisk bough which hung above the river. It is there that I found it, and no one can say that it came there of itself. When Madame Vignemal lost it, she must have risen to her feet. She had the strength to climb as far as that, and would still be alive if she had not unfortunately fallen into the Beuvron again."

"Did you keep the case you speak of?" asked Laurence.

"Yes; but I have not opened it; and if I were accused of having stolen it, I can show that it is exactly as I found it."

"You carry it about you, then?"

"No. I have hidden it where no one will ever look for it. But if you wish to have it, you shall have it to-morrow."

Mademoiselle Daudierne was startled by this offer, which needed to be thought over. The story told by Roch Ferrer might be true. She, indeed, began to believe it, and concluded that Madame Vignemal might really have been alive longer than her husband, who had only lived twenty minutes or half an hour after the capsizing of the boat; for more time than that must have elapsed between the accident and the moment when she fell from the top of the river bank. Whatever might be thought of all this, Roch's declaration, carried before the court, must throw doubt upon the whole matter. It was therefore necessary to induce him to relate his story to the court, which would decide the case, and this was what Laurence desired, but she shrank from being personally involved in this unpleasant affair.

"No," she said, after a somewhat lengthy pause, "I do not wish to have what you have found. It is enough to feel sure that you can prove what you state."

"I will prove it whenever you please. What must I do?"

"The truth must be made known. It must be established that Madame Vignemal was not dead when you found her in a swoon at the foot of the bank, and it must be known at La Germonière, at Le Fougeray, and at Arcy; and you alone can tell the story, since you alone were there; you alone saw all this. If I told it I should not be believed."

"No," sadly assented Roch Ferrer: "for you would not like to say that you came here to question me. I will speak out, then. To whom shall I tell what I have just related to you? To your uncle or Monsieur Subigny?"

"To the judge of the court ; he will decide between the Vignemal heirs."

"You are asking me for my liberty, perhaps even for my life, but no matter," said the young poacher."

"What do you mean ?"

"I mean that the judge of the court will send me to the public prosecutor, who will lock me up in prison. He already suspects me, as I saw when he questioned me. After hearing me, he will doubt no more. He will accuse me of having drowned Madame Vignemal, and everybody will think the same, for the appearances are all against me. I shall be able to prove that Madame Vignemal still lived when I found her. I shall show the leather case which she let fall, and which I picked up ; but I shall not be able to prove that I did not snatch it from her hand and throw her back into the river from the top of the bank."

"If you had killed her you would remain silent," urged Laurence, "you would not go to the public prosecutor to acquaint him with facts of which he is ignorant, and you would not hand him back, intact, the case belonging to Madame Vignemal."

"I shall be told that I ought to have begun by doing so, and not a word I may say will be believed. Is a poacher ever believed ? It is enough for a gamekeeper to take action against him for him to secure his conviction. This time I shall begin by saying that I might have prevented the accident. That will be taken down, and no attention paid to the rest. There will not be a judge found to let me off, and when I have been found guilty, all I shall have to do will be to die. But I have sworn to obey you. Ask what you may, and to-morrow morning I will go and give myself up."

Laurence had not foreseen that the statement she asked of Roch Ferrer might have such serious consequences. Since just resentment had urged her to attempt a hazardous undertaking, she did nothing but encounter difficulties quite unexpected at the time when she had resolved to be revenged upon Arthur du Pomméval.

Such a revenge was now in her power, for the poacher's declaration would undoubtedly complicate the question of the inheritance once more. But it was also very evident that Roch ran great risk of being sent to prison, tried, and finally sentenced, if he placed himself at the mercy of a magistrate already prejudiced against him ; and he would at least be sentenced for "homicide through carelessness," and perhaps for theft.

The young fellow would very likely resolve to kill himself if he were condemned to pass years, or even months, in prison. Forest birds cannot live in cages.

Mademoiselle Daudierne certainly did not desire to harm the poacher, and she would have reproached herself bitterly for making him the victim of a judicial error, for she could not help feeling considerable sympathy for the young fellow who thus devoted himself uncomplainingly, without even hesitating or asking why the sacrifice need be made, and how she would reward him. She preferred a thousand times that Pomméval should inherit the property.

Besides, Laurence understood that it was time for her to pause and reflect. She had reached the utmost limit to which a young girl can go without contracting dangerous obligations. She even regretted having gone so far.

"No ! no !" said she, quickly, "I don't want you to be exposed to the severity of an ill-disposed judge. When I asked you to go to this judge

and explain to him how Madame Vignemal died, I did not think that it might cost you so dear to tell the truth. You have shown me this, however. I agree with you that your declarations would probably cause you to be suspected, and that you would not be believed. It is, therefore, altogether useless that you should make a statement to these magistrates. I have heard your story, but I shall keep it to myself. Things will remain as they are, and you will not be disturbed. I desire that above everything else."

"You do not despise me, then, now that you know what I have done?" asked Roch Ferrer, pleadingly.

"I pity you," replied Laurence, "and I wish that I could induce you to see that you have followed a bad course from the outset. If you led a regular life no one would think of accusing you of a crime, and you would then be able, without any risk, to do me the service I asked."

"What does it matter what may happen to me? If I showed you my danger, it was not to make a merit of braving it. But when I am in the hands of the judges they will never let me go, and I shall see you no more. I was desirous of telling you again that I should only be too happy to die to serve you, and that my last thought would be of you. I tell you so now, and I swear to you that what you wish shall be done to-morrow."

"Be it what it may?"

"Be it what it may. To-morrow I shall go to Arcy, and it is probable that I shall be kept there."

"No, no! You must not go to Arcy," exclaimed Laurence, "and if you seriously wish to obey me, you must leave the district."

"You wish to send me away, then?"

"No, I wish to save you. If you remain you will come to a bad end, and I shall recognise your existence no more if you continue behaving as you have done. I have had the courage to come here and to trust in you, and I am not sorry that I have done so. But what I have done once I can do no more if you don't live differently. It depends upon you, yourself, whether you see me again. I shall never again speak to a poacher, but I would speak to a soldier of France."

"You wish me to sell myself, then?"

"No one does that now. I wish you to enlist in a regiment in Africa. I wish you to retrieve your past by serving France; I wish you to fight for your country, and become an officer some day. On that day you will be no longer obliged to hide yourself in the woods to look at our house. You could come to La Germonière, and we should be proud to receive you there, just as we have received one of our country neighbours who wasn't, I believe, any richer than you were when he became a soldier."

"The young man who lives at the Château de Bretteville; is it he you allude to?"

"Yes. How do you happen to know him?"

"I saw him to-day on the road, near the river. He was coming out of your garden, and he spoke to me."

"That is strange! What had he to say to you?"

"He told me all that you say, that I was wrong in being a poacher, and that I should do better to join his squadron. He even added that if I would go to Bretteville to see him, he would send me to the country where the fighting is going on."

"What did you reply?"

"That I loved my liberty too much to do what he advised."

"But you will do as *I* advise," urged Laurence. "I rely upon you. Besides, it is not advice, it is an order, and you have sworn to obey me."

"I shall obey you."

"Without delay? To-morrow you must go to the duke's château, and ask Monsieur Pontac to do what he has promised. I scarcely know, but I think well of him. Besides, he is soon going to return to his regiment, and when you are there he will interest himself in you and use his influence on your behalf. In a few years you will return to us a sub-lieutenant, as he returned, although he went away without a wish to return here at all."

"No, I shall never return. It would be too painful to me to see you as a married woman," was the poacher's reply.

"I shall never marry," rejoined Mademoiselle Daudierne, curtly.

"I thought that Monsieur du Pomméval was going to marry you," said Ferrer, with indomitable pertinacity.

"Why did you think that?"

"Because he goes every day to La Germonière; because he is noble, handsome, and rich," said the poacher.

"He is not yet rich, but he will be so. The Vignemal property must go to him."

"Was he threatened with losing it?"

"He was asked to prove that Monsieur Vignemal had survived his wife, and this wasn't easy."

"No, it is the reverse of the truth."

"I don't know. There is a witness who saw Monsieur Vignemal clinging to the boat, which was dashed against one of the pillars of the Pont-aux-Mouettes, twenty minutes after the accident."

"And I saw Madame Vignemal alive half-an-hour afterwards, and another quarter of an hour must have elapsed before she fell back into the water again," exclaimed Roch.

"That may be; but you can't state it without compromising yourself, and I don't wish that you should do so. The cousins of our unfortunate neighbours will lose a fine fortune; but, at all events, you will not be accused of crime."

"This man Pomméval will inherit the property then?"

"No doubt, as his right will not be disputed."

"But if I speak out, there will be a suit between him and the other heirs?"

"A suit which he would probably lose, and it would be justice if he did."

"You wish him to lose it, then?"

"I need not reply; but I will tell you frankly that I am much less interested in Monsieur du Pomméval than in his adversaries, who are poor peasants."

"And are better than he," cried Roch. "They wouldn't use their cousins' money to thrust themselves everywhere."

"I don't know what use Monsieur du Pomméval would make of his uncle's money. It is probable that he thinks of marrying, and it is certain that his fortune would greatly help him in that matter. Any mother would be willing to give him her daughter."

"And all the daughters would accept him as a husband," growled Roch savagely, between his set teeth.

"Perhaps, if they were forced to do so; but don't trouble yourself any

more about Monsieur du Pomméval, but let me recall your promise. I rely upon your seeing Monsieur Pontac to-morrow, and I shall know whether you see him or not, for on the day after to-morrow I shall go shooting with him in the Bretèche woods."

"With him alone?"

"My mother, my uncle, and my sister will be of the party, and my brother also. Why do you ask that?"

"So that I may know if Monsieur du Pomméval will be there."

"He is invited, and has accepted the invitation. What does that matter to you?"

"It doesn't matter. I thought that if I went to-morrow to tell the judges at Arcy about what took place on the banks of the Beuvron, the fine gentleman wouldn't be very gay, and perhaps he then wouldn't marry anybody at all."

"That is very likely, for he is said to be ruined. But you would have to pay too dearly for that satisfaction, and I do not attach any importance to it."

"You don't! Why then did you bid me just now to declare in court all that I knew, all that I have not dared to tell, even to Dr. Subligny, who is well disposed towards me?"

"I yielded to a capricious wish to put you to the test," replied Laurence. "I thought that you had not told us all, and the relatives of Madame Vignemal inspired me with sympathy. You showed me that you could not interfere in the suit without seriously compromising yourself. That is enough to make me renounce my idea. I do not regret having had it, since I have obtained a promise from you which you will, I do not doubt it, fulfil. You will be a soldier, and Monsieur du Pomméval will be the richest landowner in the district. But don't envy his lot. Your future will be better than his."

Roch started, and did not reply. He preferred silence to being obliged to solemnly renew a promise which he did not wish to keep, since he had learned that the destiny of the presumptive heir of the Vignemals depended upon his declaration.

"And now," resumed Mademoiselle Daudierne, "I must return to the house. Forget that you have seen me here to-night—that is, if you wish to see me again. I will remember, and, whatever may happen to you, I shall remain your friend."

At this last word, which she had somewhat hesitated to pronounce, she held out her hand, which Roch respectfully kissed, in the same manner that the handsome Arthur might have done in the drawing-room of La Germonière.

Roch did not add a word or attempt to follow her. He even let her depart without offering to caress Belt. "I had a bad thought, but I have done a good deed," said Laurence to herself. "Monsieur du Pomméval will be the heir, and this outlaw will become a good man. I alone shall be unhappy."

She would have thought otherwise had she been able to read the heart of the poacher, whom she fancied she had turned from his wild ways.

"I have guessed all," he muttered, shaking his fist at the absent enemy. "Her mother intends to compel her to marry this man, because he will have the lands and money of the Vignemals. She has a horror of him, and she has resigned herself to submit rather than allow me to run the risk of being sentenced by some judges who hate me. Well, then, it

is my task to deliver her from Monsieur du Pomméval. I will go to prison, to the galleys, to the guillotine, if they send me there; what does it matter? Mademoiselle Daudierne wouldn't marry Roch Ferrer, even if he wore an officer's epaulets. She will never be mine, but she shan't be that man's, for he shan't be the heir!"

VII.

THE Jardin des Minimes is one of the two promenades of Arcy, and the less frequented. It was formerly the garden of a convent, which after the great Revolution was transformed into a court-house. The soil is damp and the walks are dark. There is little air or sunlight. Mothers do not send their children there, and only those who have business at the court pass through it on their way.

At noon on the day after Roch Ferrer's interview with Laurence Daudierne, the young poacher crossed it, by a sidepath, and went quickly towards the spot where the sub-prefect's office stands. This is attached to the court-house itself, and overlooks a walk where the loungers of Arcy never pass.

On reaching this walk, Roch stopped to reflect awhile—a moment before giving himself up; perhaps, also, to gaze once more at the hilly country, covered with woodlands, in which he had enjoyed freedom for so many years.

From the top of the plateau, on which the promenade is laid out, the view extends very far away; the woods of La Germonière and the rocky hills among which the Beuvron takes its course limit the horizon. Roch thought that he should see them no more, for he did not delude himself as to the results of the step which he was about to take, so as to ruin his hated rival. He had thought of it all night, had tried to persuade himself that he had better follow the advice given him by Mademoiselle Daudierne than sacrifice his liberty to his revenge; had asked himself, if he would have the courage to live to see the marriage of this Pomméval, and had replied: "No, I would kill him at the door of the church, and I would kill myself afterwards. But if I prevent him from becoming the heir, he cannot marry. I shall go to prison, but she will know what I have done. She will know that I have sacrificed myself to rid her of the man whom she would have been forced to marry."

He had said all this to himself, and still pursued the same train of thought while he leaned over the garden railing; but suddenly a hand was laid on his shoulder and a well-known voice exclaimed: "What the mischief are you doing here, my lad?"

"Major* Subigny!" exclaimed Roch, turning sharply round.

"Yes, it is I," replied the doctor, with a kind smile. "You look surprised to see me. I am much more so to find you in a reverie, three hundred feet above the valley of the Beuvron."

"I did not hope to have the pleasure of meeting you here," replied Roch. I went to your house. I was told that you had returned from Paris last night, but that you had gone out. I wished to wait for you, but—"

"Jeannette put you out of doors? I expected it. She asserts that you haven't a respectable appearance. In Africa, however, she used to wait

* The surgeons in the French army are called majors.—*Trans.*

upon *zephyrs*,* who looked much worse than you do. But it can't be helped. She is very odd, and she can't be made different at her age. Still everything is all right, since I am here. It is a mere chance, however. I have been to see Judge Lestrigon, who lives near here, and as it is such a fine day I took the longest way home. You want to see me, it seems, since you left your hole to come to town? Have you broken any more bones?"

"No, major," replied the poacher, who was in the habit of addressing the doctor by his military title—a habit which the ex-army surgeon fully approved of.

"What chance, then, brought you here?" asked Dr. Subligny. "Some gamekeeper is going to bring you into court, I suppose? I sha'n't be sorry, upon my word! You will change your mode of life, perhaps."

"No, major," rejoined Roch, shaking his head, "it isn't that. The keepers let me alone—besides, for eight days past I haven't spread a net or cast a line."

"Bah! you don't tell me so! You are changing, are you? But what do you do with yourself, then? You are not a man to work in the fields."

"I don't know how to do that."

"That is an answer! You can learn how to do it—of course you can! I confess, however, that you would make a poor labourer. You must pass your time, day and night, dreaming in your hole like a hare asleep. And now, here you are at Arcy, in a reverie on the garden walk. You must be in love."

"In love!" repeated Roch, blushing to the ears.

"Why not? It would agree with your age."

"What woman would marry me?"

"I know of more than one who would," said Dr. Subligny smiling. "You are too modest, my lad! If you made up your mind to enter any farmer's service his daughter would marry you for your handsome face."

"I don't wish to marry."

"Oh, you have plenty of time before you! But I advise you not to defer turning over a new leaf. Do you know what you have caused by living in the way you do? Why, everybody suspects you of having acted badly when the Vignemals were drowned. I have said, in vain, that you risked your life to save them. No one will believe me. Even Monsieur Daudierne, who was praising you to the skies on the night of the accident, mistrusts you now."

"Did he tell you so?"

"Oh, he didn't hesitate about it; and one of these days you will be arrested by the keepers at Bretteville. You have been pointed out to them as a bad fellow who needs watching. In the town, here, it is even worse. The most horrible stories are told about you, and we have a new public prosecutor, who always makes the worst of everything. He would be delighted if he could prove that you had a hand in the death of the owners of Le Fougeray. He even tried to make you contradict yourself. I was there on the day of the necropsy, and I must say that you didn't become confused in your replies; but he doesn't feel satisfied all the same, and if any anonymous denunciation were made he would begin a criminal process against you. Ah! he is a gentleman whom I hope you will never have any dealings with. I have just seen him in the court-house. He looks like a tiger-cat."

* The slang name given to the French Zouaves in Algeria.—*Trans.*

"He is in his office, then?"

"I suppose so. He was going there when I crossed the courtyard. But I should like to know why you want to learn whether he is in his office or elsewhere."

"I wish to—to speak to him."

"Well, 'pon my word," exclaimed Dr. Subligny, "this is something new, I must say! Has he summoned you?"

"No; I came to Arcy of my own free will."

"Expressly to see a man who bears you no good will!" cried the doctor in amazement. "You must be crazy."

"No, major. I know very well what I am about. But I wished to see you first. It was for that reason that I called at your house."

"Well, I am here, and that amounts to the same thing. What have you to tell me? But, make haste, for I have little time to spare."

"I want to tell you that I told a falsehood."

"A falsehood! About what?"

"About what took place on the river banks?"

"What you did? you bad fellow! Did you really deceive us? Did you deceive Monsieur Daudierne and me? Did you kill the Vignemals, then?"

"No; but I might have saved their lives, and I did not do so. The boat-rope was rotten. I knew it, but I did not tell them of it."

"Is that all?" said the doctor, with a sigh of relief. "It is bad, certainly; but it is no hanging matter not to warn people who are rushing towards a precipice, as it were, especially as you need say nothing now. No one will call it a crime, this bad intent of yours, for no one will guess it."

"I have come to confess it to the public prosecutor."

"You must, indeed, be mad! You wish to be sent to the assizes, then? Ch! you won't be sent there for not having warned these people; but it will be thought that this is only the beginning of a confession, and you will be put on the rack with questions and turned and twisted every way, until some compromising word falls from your lips. Believe me, my lad, you had better hold your tongue, if that is all you have to reproach yourself with."

"There is something else."

"What is it? Speak out! You make my flesh creep with your half-way revelations!" cried the worthy old medical man.

"I have to reproach myself with having left Madame Vignemal at the foot of the slope," said the young poacher.

"It would, indeed, have been better to have dragged her body beyond the reach of the water; and the proof of that is that the water reached the corpse where you left it. Still you only went away to summon help, and, what is more, the poor woman showed no signs of life, and you naturally supposed that she was dead."

"No, major, I was sure, on the contrary, that she was alive. Her heart was still beating," rejoined Roch Ferrer.

"And you did not tell me of it!"

"I did not dare. If there had been no one there but you when I went back to the banks of the river, and if I had found her still there, I should not have concealed the truth from you, but I was afraid to confess everything before Monsieur Daudierne."

"I did not think that you were so timid. What you did was very wrong indeed. A person ought never to act so lightly when a human being

is in peril. It is almost the same as though you had killed Madame Vignemal, for I should probably have been able to save her if you had taken the simplest of all precautions. I thought that you had more sense!" And the doctor's face assumed an expression of indignation.

"I did not know what I was doing."

"What I think most serious in all this is your want of frankness. I despise and loathe falsehood. You have repented, since you confess your error; but it is too late, and the avowal will do no good. Come, now! I hope that you don't mean to tell all this to the public prosecutor."

"Excuse me, major; it is for that purpose that I came to Arcy."

"But your confession doesn't amount to anything, or it amounts to too much. Never will a magistrate, so ill disposed as this prosecutor is, admit that your new story is the true one. You deceived him once when he questioned you about the affair at Le Fougeray; he will think that you are deceiving him again, and he will treat you accordingly."

"I expect it."

"You really wish to be put in prison, then? What can have put such a fancy into your head? What is your motive? You can never make me believe that you are going to give yourself up for the pleasure of being shut in jail."

"I have nothing to conceal from you now, major. My aim is to prevent the cousins of Madame Vignemal from losing their relative's wealth."

"Oho!" said Dr. Subligny in surprise, "I did not expect that answer! You are trying to influence the course of the law in a case of disputed inheritance? That's astounding! What can you do in the matter, I should like to know?"

"I can do a great deal; for I can prove that the wife survived the husband, and then——"

"The devil you can. You know the law, it seems? Presently we shall have you quoting the code! Where in the world did you study law? Did it come to you when you were running about the woods or dreaming on the banks of the river?"

"I did not know anything about it," rejoined Roch; "but I have been told that the suit depended upon one thing only."

"Good! I see that you have been told all about it. You couldn't have guessed that all alone. Who told you all this? Come, out with it."

"People about here," said Roch, who was visibly embarrassed.

"Tell me who they were."

"I don't know their names."

"Better and better! To serve ~~these~~ fellows whom you have met by chance, you will run the risk of losing your liberty. I warn you, in charity, that this fine self-sacrifice on your part will be utterly useless to them. You don't know, it seems, that Monsieur Vignemal was still alive at the moment when the boat he clung to was dashing against the Pont aux Mouettes, twenty minutes after the first accident?"

"And ten minutes before his wife fell from the top of the embankment into the Beuvron."

"What! from the top of the embankment? You left her at the bottom?"

"She recovered consciousness while I went for help to La Germonière and dragged herself up there."

"I am surprised, indeed, to hear that," said Dr. Subligny, who looked more and more embarrassed. "I am willing to admit that this is no

invention of yours ; but I should like to know why you have kept it back so long instead of telling it to me."

"Because I was ashamed of my carelessness, which cost Madame Vignemal her life. It is true that I didn't like her, but I tried to save her, and failed."

"You are not telling the true reason. I will venture to bet that you have just found out what your testimony would be worth in case of a lawsuit between the heirs."

"I found it out yesterday."

"Very good ! And at once, seized with a happy zeal, you rush to enlighten the public prosecutor, and can think of no better way than to fall at the feet of this functionary, whose business it is to seize upon any one who seems to him to be at all suspicious."

"I would rather submit to my fate than suffer an injustice to be committed."

"This noble feeling may cost you dear. You are greatly interested, it seems, in Madame Vignemal's relations?"

"They are poor."

"They are not so poor as you are ; for you have nothing of your own. One of them is in a very good position, let me tell you, for he has become an officer. His name is Roger Pontac."

"He lives at the Château de Bretteville."

"Aha ! you know him, it seems. Was it he who gave you this advice?" asked Dr. Subligny, suspiciously.

"No, major ; I met him last night for the first time. He spoke to me on the roadside, but he did not tell me that he was one of the heirs. He only told me that he was a friend of yours, and——"

"Very good, indeed ! I thought that Roger Pontac was incapable of urging you to make a dangerous attempt for his own interest's sake. But I cannot understand the matter at all. Who are you sacrificing yourself for?"

"No one, major. But there is the other one—the nephew of Monsieur Vignemal."

"Arthur du Pomméval ? Well, what if he does have Le Fougeray and the money ? Do you imagine that he would make war upon you and set his men after you?"

"I shouldn't care for him, or for them. But he is going to marry one of the young ladies at La Germonière," said Roch.

"Well, yes ; he is going to marry Germaine, the younger one. What is that to you?"

"Germaine ! Did you say Germaine?" exclaimed Roch Ferrer.

"I did," replied the doctor, "and I think that you might as well have the politeness to say : 'Mademoiselle Germaine.'"

"The younger of the Daudierne young ladies?" repeated Roch, with what to the doctor seemed very singular insistence.

"Yes, the younger one. But I return to my question : 'What does it matter to you if the lady at La Germonière marries off her daughters, or rather one of them?'"

"Nothing at all, major. Yes—I am—very glad," stammered Roch.

"You don't look so ; you seem to be completely bewildered," replied Dr. Subligny, eyeing the poacher keenly.

"I assure you, major, that it is with joy."

"With joy ! because Monsieur du Pomméval is about to enter the

Daudierne family? Come, now, that is a little too much. A moment ago you were wishing that he might lose the property of his aunt Vignemal."

"Ah! now I don't care whether he has it or not."

"Why do you say 'now'?"

"Because a moment ago I didn't know what I know now. You wouldn't deceive me?" replied the poacher.

"Deceive you! What do you mean, pray?"

"It is really Mademoiselle Germaine who is going to marry this gentleman?"

"Yes, my lad. And the proof of it is, that only last week, I went—yes, I myself—to ask for her hand for him."

"And she has agreed to be his wife?"

"Almost. He is allowed to go every day to La Germonière. He is very much in love with her, and he is well suited to please her. The marriage will be finally settled before Madame Daudierne returns to Paris."

"If I were only sure of it!" said Roch Ferrer to himself. And hanging his head, he became lost in thoughts, which M. Subigny now began to divine.

They were both alone upon the plateau which overlooked the surrounding country. The inhabitants of Arcy are weary of the landscapes which attract tourists, and in winter time they prefer striding up and down the Rue Nationale to exposing themselves to the west wind in order to admire the scenery.

"Roch," said the doctor, gently, after a short pause, "you promised to hide nothing from me, but you are doing so."

"I, major?" stammered the gipsy. "I swear to you that——"

"Don't swear; it would be perjury! You had better confess that you entertain a most absurd passion for Mademoiselle Laurence Daudierne, the elder of the young ladies we were talking of."

Roch Ferrer remained silent, but his confusion betrayed him.

"It was for that reason," resumed the doctor, "that you gazed at her so intently, the other night, in the kitchen at the château. I saw it very well, but I should never have imagined that you could be mad enough to fall in love with a young girl who would no more think of you than she would think of her gardener."

"I know that she does not recognise my existence," replied Roch, with a gloomy look.

"You love her, however. You will say that it isn't your fault, and I won't discuss the matter. Such things happen every day. But it is very unfortunate for poor devils who fall in love with women above them in station. To adore Mademoiselle Daudierne is much the same as though you adored the daughter of the Emperor of China. It is a case of mental disease, and I must cure you. Tell me how it came about, and when."

"When? Ah! I saw her for the first time many, many months ago, she was walking along the slope above the Beuvron, and I was hidden in the tamarisk hedge. How, do you ask me? I don't know, but I felt at once that until that moment I had not lived——"

"Sentimental! You are more smitten than I thought. What did you do after this lightning stroke?" asked M. Subigny in a mocking tone.

"I followed her without being seen. Wherever she went, I went."

"You did not speak to her?"

"No—never."

Roch hesitated but a second before giving this last reply, but the doctor saw that he did so, and his face clouded. He was sceptical enough not to entirely believe in the absolute discretion of young ladies, even of the best trained among them, and he asked himself whether this handsome outlaw was sincere, or merely discreet, like a man of the world. However, he replied, "I am willing to believe you, and I must praise you for having controlled yourself so well. It is nevertheless true that you are playing a dangerous game, not only as regards yourself but as regards the person who has turned your brain. You realise, I suppose, that she could not take you for her husband?"

Roch nodded.

"I suppose you dare not think of her in any other way?"

Roch made an indignant gesture.

"Well then," continued the doctor, "your clandestine pursuit, walking about the woods and hiding when she passes by, can only compromise her, and you must abandon it. Now, since you confess that your absurd passion can only result in making you lose the little sense you have left, will you tell me what you would gain by preventing Monsieur du Pomméval from marrying?"

"I don't wish to prevent him now. I told you that I did not."

"Because he is a suitor for Mademoiselle Germaine's hand; but when you thought that he wished to marry Mademoiselle Laurence, you had made up your mind to accuse yourself of a whole string of bad actions which you did not commit, I am sure of it; you came to give yourself up to justice like a criminal driven to this course by remorse, and solely to ruin a gentleman who never harmed you in any shape or way."

"Yes—I would rather die than suffer."

"You would only have succeeded in getting into prison," retorted Dr. Subligny, "for in spite of your declarations, Monsieur du Pomméval would have won his suit, and you would have had a very bad action on your conscience."

"Is it a bad action to tell the truth?"

"No; but you can't make me believe that Madame Vignemal came to life on the bank of the river and climbed to the top of the hillock."

"It is so true," replied Roch, "that she dropped a portfolio which she had been holding in her hand. I found it the next day, and I picked it up and placed it in a hiding-place, where it still is."

"The deuce! that is another matter!" exclaimed the doctor. "If this portfolio has some money, or a will inside it, or even some papers belonging to Madame Vignemal, unexpected results may follow. This portfolio may be a 'Pandora's box;' but you don't know what Pandora's box is, and you will understand me better if I tell you that the first thing that will happen is that you will be accused of having stolen it."

"Very likely," said Roch, indifferently.

"For that reason I advise you to leave it where it is," resumed Dr. Subligny, promptly. "I don't care to assume the responsibility of taking charge of it, especially at the present time. Later on, when you are out of the reach of the persons who might like to injure you, I may undertake to hand this portfolio to the people entitled to it, for it may be the turning-point of the law-suit, if there is any suit at all. But, in the first place, let me deal with your position. You have, I presume, abandoned your foolish idea of going to the public prosecutor and telling him a story which would only result in your being thrust into the jail at Arcy?"

"I have given it up, as you tell me that there is no question of marrying Mademoiselle Laurence to this man," said Roch.

"Again! how obstinate you are! Must I give you my word of honour?"

"No, major. I am sure that you would not deceive me."

"You have confidence in me, then? That's all right. Well, then, you must follow the advice I am going to give you, and all will be well. Listen to me, my lad. You know that this part of the country isn't the place for you?"

"Why not? I have lived here till now, and I can surely still do so," rejoined Roch Ferrer.

"You have lived here because you have been allowed to do so. You were seen here as a child, and people have got used to seeing you. Things are tolerated in you that wouldn't be passed over in another. The peasantry don't like you very much, perhaps, but they would not denounce you. The Vignemals, who formerly worried you, didn't wish you any great harm in reality, for they never followed up the complaints which they made about you. The court was informed of your little misdemeanours; it was known that you had declared war on society by purloining game and fish; but it was also known that you didn't sell what you shot and caught, and so people shut their eyes. However, this couldn't have gone on for ever. What is forgiven in a youth is not forgiven in a man; still the danger of a bad end was not immediate. But now an event has occurred which has attracted a good deal of attention, and the truce is over. There is trouble in store for you. If you remain silent you will have Madame Vignemal's cousins against you, for they suspect you of knowing a great deal about their relative's death. If you speak out you will have the people in court against you, and they won't have any scruple about treating you like a criminal. It would have already been done if their chief had not taken it into his head to accuse a young man whom I am intimate with, an excellent fellow, who is even more innocent than you are; however, you must not count upon a long respite. I came in time to stop you on the road to prison, but you will be 'tracked to your lair,' to quote an expression which M. Gambetta was fond of, and which can rightfully be applied to you, as you live like a wolf. The conclusion is, you must go away."

"You wish me to become a soldier, don't you?" asked the young poacher.

"Yes; how did you guess it?" rejoined Dr. Subligny, who was considerably surprised.

"The officer who lives at Bretteville gave me the same advice."

"That doesn't surprise me. We talked together about you, and he thought as I did. You were born for war, and it would be a pity to keep you from fulfilling your vocation. Nothing more keeps you here, I believe?"

"Nothing," said Roch Ferrer, sadly.

"That is right, then!" rejoined the doctor. "Drive away the thoughts that trouble your brain. Be a man, and I will answer for your future. Pontac will open the way for you. Go to see him, and tell him that I sent you."

"He is expecting me to-day."

"You would have done much better if you had gone to him this morning rather than have shown yourself in the town, but what is deferred is not

always lost. Besides, I myself wish to see our friend, Roger ; I wish to come to an understanding with him about you in the first place, and then as to other matters, for he will inherit the Vignemal property if Pomméval doesn't. I will write to him to come and see me. We will arrange for your engagement together. Come back on the day after to-morrow—everything will be ready for your departure at an early date, and Jeannette shall have orders to let you in. Meanwhile, I beg of you to keep quiet. Try to be seen as little as possible. You must begin, just now, by trying to be forgotten. Believe me, Roch, it will be better for you not to sleep near the Beuvron to-night. Change your sleeping place, don't go out in the daytime, come to me on the day after to-morrow, between eleven and twelve, and for the present make off at a brisk pace along the road which skirts the old town. Be off, my lad, and no foolishness, eh ?' said the doctor, in conclusion, honouring his favourite with a warm grasp of his hand.

Roch did not dream of troubling Laurence's peace. He had only feared that she might marry M. du Pomméval, and he was determined to enlist ; but he went off with a heavy heart, for he was by no means resigned to the idea of leaving the district without seeing her once more.

VIII.

IN the eyes of the peaceful inhabitants of La Germonière, including even uncle Armand and his nephew, Alfred, a day's shooting in the ducal forest of La Bretèche was quite an event, and the plan made in presence of Roger Pontac furnished matter for deliberations throughout the following day.

To consent was nothing, although Madame Daudierne had objections to offer. Mothers always have objections, and especially when the question is to allow their daughters an eccentric amusement. She had also felt some reluctance in accepting so marked a favour from a country neighbour who had not called upon her ; but the duke's rank and age, and especially the sad affliction which he had recently sustained, excused her accepting so unceremoniously, the more so as when M. Daudierne called at Bretteville, the old nobleman had apologised for not visiting La Germonière in person. Besides, the invitation had been given in haste, and Madame Daudierne, suddenly called upon to accept it, had not thought at the moment of any good reason for a refusal.

The engagement once made, the planning of the expedition alone remained to be alluded to. But how many details had been omitted in arranging the party ! What difficulties arose which had not been foreseen ! The invitation was general, and included M. du Pomméval. Uncle Armand had applied affirmatively for one and all. However, his prudent sister-in-law had lost no time in making objections, and she had still to decide whether she would be one of the party or not. She did not like going away from home, and the various sports which foreigners have introduced into France by no means tempted her.

She would not have thought of allowing her daughters to follow a stag hunt. The customs of quiet citizens—and Madame Daudierne was thoroughly imbued with their ideas—were opposed to such proceedings as these. Lawn tennis, the favourite game of English girls, seemed to her, moreover, to be better suited for developing the muscles of growing boys than for forming the hearts and minds of maidens. This time,

however, she could not revoke her given permission, and she preferred to accompany her daughters rather than let them go alone, for uncle Armand, though of a suitable age to act the chaperon over them, was so ardent a sportsman that he might easily forget his nieces while he was busy with the deer. He admitted this himself, and to quiet his sister-in-law's apprehensions, he proposed an arrangement which would settle everything.

The forest of La Bretèche was full of fine avenues, which nothing impeded the family carriage from following, drawn by its two quiet mares; moreover, nothing prevented its being stationed at a cross-road while the starters are beating up the game; and the watchful mother, comfortably installed on the well-stuffed cushions, could follow all the chances of the chase and the movements of the various sportsmen as well as of her own daughters.

The idea was simple and practical, and Madame Daudierne agreed to it all the more readily as Laurence declared at once that she, herself, only wished to look on. She had never handled a gun, and felt no wish to massacre poor inoffensive animals. She also, perhaps, wished to avoid M. du Pomméval, who intended to take an active part in the work of destruction.

Since the noble girl's interview with Roch Ferrer, she had realised that it would be unworthy of her to revenge herself for his treachery, and so she had resolved to show him nothing but indifference and scorn.

There was no room, by the way, for handsome Arthur in the Daudierne family carriage, and he intended coming direct from Arcy in his dog-cart.

The uncle and nephew were accustomed to shooting, and knew what they would have to do when once on the grounds, the uncle especially, for the nephew had more ardour than experience, too much, indeed, to be looked upon with confidence either as a marksman or a stalker. M. Daudierne proposed sending him to the end of the line, far enough removed from his nearest neighbour for the latter to incur no danger of being shot. He could not be induced to undertake the guidance of his sister, and Madame Daudierne relied only upon herself to prevent Germaine from rushing into peril.

After a lively discussion, in which she was the only one who upheld her opinion, the good lady had ended by yielding to the prayer of her younger daughter, who wished to play an active part in the expedition arranged by Roger Pontac.

Germaine had indeed long urged her uncle to take her with him when he went shooting, but he had always refused her request, declaring that game was not abundant around La Germonière; that Germaine could not bear the fatigue of long watchings under trees and interminable walks across ploughed fields. He did not refuse, however, to teach her how to fire a gun, and he had brought from Paris a handsome little affair with "central-percussion fire," bought at an excellent gunmaker's, and not much heavier than a child's toy.

Uncle Armand knew how to teach what he undertook to teach, and he gave his niece lessons on the banks of the Beuvron, where water-fowl is plentiful, and in a short time Germaine shot very well. She could bring down a gull on the wing, and hit a garganey duck when it raised its head after diving. Such being the case, M. Daudierne could scarcely prevent her from taking part in the battue, which is certainly the easiest of all sport, as it needs only patience and coolness. It suffices to wait till the game comes near, and not to shoot the beaters who send it towards you.

So it was agreed that Germaine should be provided with a gun and allowed to use it. She solemnly promised to be as staid as an old guardsman, and never to fire away at hazard for the pleasure of hearing the gun go off, to conform strictly to the directions of the keeper who was charged with placing the marksmen at their posts, not to leave her place under any pretext, and, in short, to behave better than many experienced sportsmen ever do.

The great question of the costume she was to wear remained to be settled. On the occasions when Germaine had gone shooting at the water side, she had simply worn a jacket over her dress, but this was too plain for the occasion, and it was necessary to find something more suitable. Madame Daudierne was greatly opposed to any *mannish-looking* attire, and thought that a woman who goes so far as to shoot at all, might as well go into the woods in her morning dress; so that uncle Armand had great trouble in convincing her that such dresses and delicate boots cannot hold out against brambles and sharp stones.

Young Alfred, who approved of all the new fashions, had hunted up some numbers of *La Vie Parisienne*, and found several engravings of costumes suited to all occasions. All of them were charming, and it was only necessary to select the one which would best suit Germaine's face and figure.

This talented young man first proposed a Louis-Quinze coat in ribbed velvet with embroidery, large steel buttons, breeches of the same material and a light plum-colour satin waistcoat, with gloves and high boots of grey buckskin, a frill and cuffs of Malines lace, and a cocked hat with pink feathers. Then, as his sisters laughed in his face at this suggestion, he selected a Tyrolese costume, somewhat less theatrical; a long skirted coat with knickerbockers, with a waistcoat of chamois cloth, leather gaiters, heavy shoes with plenty of nails in the soles, and a maroon felt hat with a falcon's wing in it. This was not approved of any better than the first costume, and then a polonaise edged with beaver, green plush breeches, Souwarow boots, and a schapska were blackballed unanimously.

Madame Daudierne declared that all of these costumes were highly improper, and uncle Armand took the trouble to explain to his nephew that the fashions of "high life" were not suitable for young girls who had been quietly brought up.

Alfred, thereupon, offered to rush in all haste to Paris and to bring back a masterpiece in the way of a hunting costume, made in a single night by a fashionable, "ladies' tailor," but this absurd proposal was rejected also.

Germaine fortunately remembered, that she possessed all that was necessary to make up a shooting-suit, and one that would have a suitable appearance and at the same time prove convenient to wear. On returning the year before, from a trip to Finistère, the sisters had brought with them a complete costume, such as is worn by the peasantry of Brittany, and which seemed as though it had been made expressly for Germaine. She had often put it on to pose for her sister when the latter was making a water colour drawing which she wished to preserve, as a souvenir of the trip, and in which a child was shown kneeling before a cross at the roadside. All that was necessary was to slightly lengthen the jacket, and the vest covered with bright embroidery, to make the breeches still more baggy, and replace the wooden shoes by heavy boots.

All this was the work of a few hours, and Laurence gave her assistance.

The suit was tried on in the evening in the drawing-room, and Madame Daudierne was forced to admit that her daughter could wear it by daylight without going beyond the prescribed limits in oddity. The fact is, the costume suited Germaine extremely well. She had caught her beautiful light hair up in a knot at the top of her head, covered it with a red kerchief, and, then upon the latter she had set the familiar wide brimmed Breton hat. She only needed an old flint gun and a large knife hanging from her belt to look like a young Chouan, of the days of the first revolution, and yet she had lost naught of her womanly grace.

Uncle Armand could find no fault, and the question of Germaine's dress being settled to general satisfaction, everybody retired to rest earlier than usual, so as to be afoot betimes in the morning. The meet was fixed for ten o'clock, and it would require forty minutes to reach the appointed spot without forcing the grey mares beyond their usual pace.

The sun rises late in December, and everybody was awake before dawn. Like a careful hostess, Madame Daudierne had given orders for a breakfast that could be swallowed without much delay, and every one present did honour to it. She then gave her orders for dinner, to which it was intended that M. du Pomméval and M. Pontac should be invited.

Everything being all settled, the party set off. Laurence, although somewhat pale, looked all the more charming for that. Her large black eyes had never sparkled more brightly, and her dress was a most tasteful one. Madame Daudierne was wrapped up in a heavy cloak of costly fur. M. Armand, who did not like to be ill at ease, had adopted his usual shooting dress; a soft felt hat, shoes with leather gaiters, and a suit of checked cloth. But his nephew had soared beyond him, and with his knickerbockers, fanciful shot-bag, and pointed hat, he looked like a Calabrian brigand.

The carriage took the main road, which Germaine had followed on returning to La Germonière after her romantic adventure, and they had gone to some distance when the loud barking of a dog made the mares prick up their ears.

"Belt is following us!" exclaimed young Alfred, turning round on the box where he had perched himself. "The devil take him! He will be frightening our game."

"The fact is," said M. Daudierne, "that no one ever saw a Danish hound at a battue. Was this absurd idea yours, Germaine? I shall repudiate you as a niece."

"Not at all," replied Germaine, "Belt slept in my room all night. It was my turn to keep him. But I knew very well that he is good for nothing at a shooting party, and I took care to shut him up when I left the room."

"That was an idle precaution. You must have known that your maid would let him out. You ought to have sent him to his kennel and have had him tied up."

"I should have objected to that with all my might," observed Laurence. "Belt is our friend, and I don't wish to have him chained up."

"That is all very well," exclaimed young Alfred, in his turn; "but we cannot shoot with that animal at our heels. Monsieur Pontac would take me for a fool. I have a great mind to shoot your Danish hound."

"Don't attempt to do that," rejoined Germaine. "I am sorry that he came; but it is no reason for hurting him, and I take him under my royal protection."

"Mr. Nephew," said uncle Armand, at this moment, "I advise you to alight, take him back to La Germonière, and put him under key in the stable. That would be much better than killing a dog which we are all fond of."

"Well," said Alfred, "I call that a nice proposal and no mistake. I should be obliged to walk a couple of miles to catch you up, and the shooting would all be over by the time I got to Bretteville."

"You can mount Ralph and come back very quickly," said M. Daudierne, laughing. He enjoyed quizzing Alfred.

"In this shooting-dress!" cried the young man, indignantly. "Never! I should look ridiculous! Pomméval would tell everybody at the club the story of my ride in knickerbockers, and the fellows there would split their sides with laughing at me. I had rather bear the penalty of my sister's carelessness. There must be a keeper down there who will undertake to muzzle the dog and tie him to a tree by his fore paws."

"I shall not allow that," said Laurence. "Belt has never been used to such treatment as that, and I see no reason for beginning it now. My mother and I will keep him with us."

"Do you think he would stay with you? Not he!"

"Yes, he will. He does everything that I bid him. And when I tell him not to stir he minds me. Won't you mind me, Belt?" added Laurence, looking at the Danish hound who had overtaken the old mares, and was joyously gamboling round the carriage.

"He will defend us if a wolf attacks us," said Madame Daudierne, with a smile.

"There are no wolves at Le Bretèche, my dear Reine," replied uncle Armand, "but I rely upon my niece to keep her pet beside her, and I hope that she will succeed in doing so."

"Don't believe that," grumbled his nephew. "But we can't manage in any other way, and we must let him come. So much the worse for him if he darts into the woods when he scents the game and gets hit! That will teach him to mind his own business."

No one took up this indirect threat, but Laurence's face grew sad. She was glad that Belt had come, and promised herself not to lose sight of the faithful friend who had accompanied her upon her nocturnal excursion.

"Without him," thought she, "I should never have had the courage to go and see Roch Ferrer. I should not know that the world contained a man who was really prepared to sacrifice himself for my sake, and that, if I wished it, the traitor who has deceived me would lose the fortune which he relies upon to dazzle my sister, and wring from her a consent to marry him. I certainly don't regret having spared him; his downfall would not have consoled me for the suffering of that brave fellow, Roch; but I am glad to think that I hold Monsieur du Pomméval's destiny in my own hands, and I shall perhaps allow myself the satisfaction of letting him know that he is at my mercy."

"The weather is in our favour," said Germaine, who was in the highest spirits. "It is as mild as spring, and sport will be magnificent. It seems to me that Monsieur Pontac has brought us good luck. We were all very sad after the death of our neighbours at Le Fougeray. But Monsieur Pontac comes one fine day to La Germonière, and everything changes. I don't care now about going back to Paris before New-Year's day."

"The young hussar is certainly a charming fellow," remarked uncle Armand. "What a pity that he isn't rich!"

"He seems to bear that misfortune very well, and I really don't pity him much. He is fond of the army, and he wouldn't change his position for that of the richest landowner in this place. Besides he will be a general one of these days, and then he will have plenty of money."

"No doubt; but meanwhile he might perhaps wish to marry, and he would be a husband such as I should like for a daughter of my own, if I had one. He ought to have some two or three hundred thousand francs. Unfortunately when a man hasn't a penny he can only hope to marry some washerwoman or seamstress."

"Why is that?" asked Germaine. "If that were the absolute rule, all that need be done would be to match all the equal fortunes together, and nobody would then have to be consulted but the family lawyers. The affianced pair would not need to see each other till they met at the mayor's office."

"You exaggerate, my dear girl," replied uncle Armand. "I admit that love matches may sometimes turn out well. But I may be permitted to regret that a young man who is so likely to please the sex by his personal merit should not have money as well. You have had the good luck to meet with Pomméval. That is an excellent match. But supposing that La Bretèche and the Château de Bretteville belonged to Monsieur Roger Pontac? Don't you think that, in that case, he would be a good match for your sister? Then the whole domain of La Germonière, Le Fougeray on one side and La Bretèche on the other, would be a clear sweep. What hunts there would be on the grounds, then! I should stay at your mother's house all the time, young ladies."

"That would be delightful, but it is only a dream," sighed Germaine; "let us be content with the permission which the Duke de Bretteville has so kindly given us."

"This is a wise speech, little one! Truth is sometimes heard, you see, from the lips of childhood, and wisdom consists in enjoying what we have without sighing for what we haven't. It seems to me that we are getting near our destination," added M. Daudierne. "Over there, on our left, I see the peaks that I saw the other day when I went to thank the lord of this land, so his forest cannot be far off."

"That is the Roche-de-Lémon which you see over there, and the meet is at the cross-road at the foot of the fairies' abode."

"How is it that you know so much? I thought that you had never been here before."

"Oh! on the day before yesterday, when we were at home, Monsieur Pontac described the famous rock to me. There is no possibility of mistaking it. It is the one which rises up like a tower at the top of the hill." Thus answered Germaine, still bent on keeping her adventure at the Roche-de-Lémon a secret.

"It is a strange-looking rock, I see, and I should like to look more closely at it. But to-day we have something better to do than climb up there."

"Yes, you have, and so have I; but if I were in the place of Laurence, I should go up there, instead of staying here shivering in the carriage."

"I have nothing to ask of the fairies," said the elder sister, sadly.

"Bah! what risk is there in calling out your name to them! If they haven't a husband to offer they do not answer. But they are very discreet, and don't reveal the secrets that are confided to them. Try it! No one can tell what might happen."

"I see Arthur du Pomméval's dog-cart," called out young Alfred at this moment. "Arthur has alighted, and the beaters are all along the road. They are only waiting for us. That's the usual way when people only have two old mares that go like tortoises!"

"They don't start off like Ralph, who almost caused your sister to break her neck, and I like them for that," replied uncle Armand. "We are the last, but what of it? It is a lover's duty to be the first on hand, and Pomméval does as he ought to."

"I see Monsieur Pontac," said Germaine, who had stood up to look out of the carriage.

"He must be there to receive us, as he does the honours for the duke. Yes. I see him, myself," resumed uncle Armand. "He is talking with a man in a kind of livery."

"That is the head whipper-in," declared Alfred. "He is a knowing old chap. The duke has four of them, with six horses and sixty hounds, from La Vendée, all admirably matched."

"You are trying, my dear boy, I see, to dazzle us with your terms of venery, but all you say is destitute of common sense. Monsieur de Bretteville has a very fine establishment, we all know it, but to-day we are not going hunting, and the whippers-in and the hounds are still at the château."

Uncle Armand was right. The man who took Roger Pontac's orders that day was simply a gamekeeper, and the men who had met a little further on were a party of peasants engaged for beating the bushes.

The plain-looking carriage conveying the Daudierne family, soon reached the point where, around the rocky peak of Lémon, four roads branched off towards the forest. There was a semi-circular clearing cut out among the bushes, on the sloping ground, and here ten carriages and fifty guests could have easily found room. In the centre of the open space rose a small obelisk in granite, before which stood three servants who were taking charge of a table loaded with game-pies, joints, and other cold dishes. Delicate wines had not been forgotten, or warming *liqueurs* either. Bottles of Champagne with their necks swathed in gilt foil stood opposite some tall flasks of old brandy which looked like nine-pins.

"That sub-lieutenant of hussars is a first-rate purveyor!" exclaimed M. Daudierne, at sight of these preparations. "He has foreseen what would be needed. One question is settled, my dear Reine! You need not have your dinner early, as we shall find enough here to satisfy the most exacting appetite."

"That is plainly Monsieur du Pomméval's opinion," said Germaine, pointing to the handsome Arthur, who was setting his glass upon the table, after imbibing some rare old cognac.

"He is right to take something to keep up his strength," exclaimed uncle Armand. "Would you have him drink water?"

"Lovers should never drink anything else."

"Lovers who haven't a word to say for themselves; but you don't care for such, or Laurence either, I imagine."

Laurence did not reply to this remark; but turned away to avoid bowing to Arthur du Pomméval, who was now coming forward, his hat in his hand, and a smile upon his lips.

The carriage had just stopped; Alfred had already alighted and was opening the door. In an instant everybody was out of it, and the heir of the Vignemals was shaking hands with the uncle and nephew, who were

equally cordial. Madame Daudierne and Germaine were more reserved, but they received him politely, and Laurence alone was very formal.

Roger, who had finished giving his orders to the head gamekeeper, came up while these greetings were going on. "We are late I see," said M. Daudierne, after the usual salutations. "Your people, I'll venture to say, have been afoot since dawn, and I am very sorry to have made you wait."

"I am sorry myself that I set so early an hour," replied Pontac. "Unfortunately, when we start late at this season, we have only time enough to beat up a few places close by; and as the ladies were kind enough to offer us their presence, I wanted the day's sport to be a complete success."

"We can fire at whatever we like, can't we?" asked Germaine, in a lively tone, while playing with her little gun.

"Yes, mademoiselle. No one has shot over La Bretèche this year, and the keepers think that there are too many does and hen-pheasants. There is nothing to prevent knocking over a few. The Duke de Breteville is only anxious to save an old stag which his son often hunted, but could never reach."

"To kill a stag with a gun-shot would be a murder," said uncle Armand, who did not approve of deerstalking, as it is carried on in the Highlands.

"Especially that one, he is a perfect king of the forest," replied Roger.

"But he is easily to be recognised by his horns. He is a *ten-branch*."

"I should be sorry, indeed, if he were wounded," observed Germaine; "but I hope that I shall see him. I have never seen a stag, except at the Jardin d'Acclimation, and I imagine that a free stag must be superb."

"So is a free lion," said M. Daudierne.

"You may laugh, but if I ever went to Africa, I should go to a lion-hunt."

"You must have killed some lions, Pontac," exclaimed uncle Armand, "for you have been eight or ten years in Algiers."

"Never, sir," modestly replied the hussar officer. "The army takes up all my time, and I never think of hunting. But it is just as well to tell Mademoiselle Germaine that an old stag is almost as dangerous as a lion."

"You exaggerate a little, lieutenant," observed uncle Armand, "but it is certain that horned animals are formidable, and that it is not well to be too near them. 'If the stag is too near, you find a bier,' is a saying known to all foresters. The pointed antlers of a ten-branched stag on the defensive will drive in a man's breast-bone. For this reason, niece, I advise you to get out of the way of the stag if he comes near you."

"Oh! I wouldn't hurt him," said Germaine.

"Besides, it is understood that no one shall fire at the beast. Now, my dear Pontac, we await your orders. Will you tell us what we have to do? I must inform you that my sister-in-law and her elder daughter have made up their minds to watch the sport from the carriage."

"That will be very easy. All the roads are good. We have three spots to beat up, and we will begin, if you like, by the furthest one before returning here, where lunch is ready for us."

"The lunch can be neglected for the time being," said uncle Armand. "We breakfasted heartily before leaving, and we hope that you will return to dine with us at La Germonière."

"I am very much obliged to you, sir, but I don't know whether——"

"No matter; we will talk of that after the shooting. Just now you

have four guns to place in position; one of them dangerous, that is my nephew's, and one of them inoffensive, which is my niece's, of course."

"Inoffensive!" exclaimed Germaine, "you will see presently if I miss a shot within range. "I'll bet that I shall kill more than you will."

"If your brother kills nothing but game, I shall not say a word," retorted uncle Armand.

"You take me for a child," said Alfred, greatly vexed.

"No; but I don't believe in your skill or coolness. We shall take you between us, Pontac and I, and he, as well as I, knows what shooting is. We will watch over you."

"You must excuse me, sir," said Roger, "for I must direct the starters, and go with them."

"Is that why you have no gun?"

Pontac, in fact, had no weapon but a hunting-knife hanging from a doeskin belt. "Yes," he replied, "I should have been tempted to use it, and I shall be more useful if I lead the battue. The keeper whom I brought from Bretteville will not suffice to direct the beaters, who have been recruited hap-hazard among the peasantry about here. But may I ask you how this dog came here?" resumed Pontac, caressing Belt, who, having found a friend in him, was stretching his intelligent head towards him.

"He came without our permission," said Germaine, "but he won't trouble you. My sister will take care of him."

Roger bowed, and Pomméval, who was surprised that the Danish hound had been allowed to come, did not dare to object to the wishes of the young ladies. The brilliant heir was much more silent than usual, and seemed to have lost some of his usual coolness. It was evident that something disturbed him: the presence of Laurence, perhaps, who but two evenings before had so openly declared war against him, and had such good reasons for being hostile. He was, perhaps, also beginning to feel jealous of Roger Pontac.

That day the representative of the gilded youth of Arcy had, as the saying goes, "spread all his sails." His dog-cart had been built by one of the best firms in Paris; his horse had cost him two hundred louis; his groom seemed to have come direct from England in a band-box; his gun was a *choke-bored* rifle, bought in London, at Purdey's, the swell gunmaker; his shooting-suit, made by a fashionable tailor, was in perfect taste; and, in a word, nothing was wanting to complete his appearance, which was that of a "young lover" on the stage.

And yet he felt that the natural distinction and the simplicity of Lieutenant Pontac availed him better than all the studied elegance which only dazzles the inexperienced. Pontac had come on foot. He did not dress like the gentlemen who figure in fashion-plates, and he made no pretensions whatever as to skill in shooting; but his reserved manner, his almost haughty coldness, was like that of some gentleman who has fine estates of his own, and who is doing the honours of his shooting grounds to simple citizens. Under this seeming indifference it was easy to guess that there were warm feelings and a will of iron. His eyes showed that he could command, and love as well.

"It is fortunate that this sub-lieutenant hasn't a penny," thought the handsome Arthur, by way of soothing his vanity, which was wounded by the comparison he made between the officer and himself.

Mademoiselle Germaine Daudierne did not appear to pay any great attention to the officer on leave. Indeed, she was entirely engrossed in

handling her pretty gun, and impatiently waiting for the chance to use it. Laurence had again seated herself in the carriage, beside her mother, and she called to Belt, who made but one bound from the ground to the vehicle, and seated himself quietly at the feet of his young mistress.

The beaters in their blue blouses and wooden shoes now passed by, staves in hand, and led by the gamekeeper.

"Would you like, first of all, mademoiselle, to shoot a few hares?" asked Roger.

"Anything will suit me to-day," replied Germaine.

"There is a little plain near here in one corner of the forest where small game is apt to gather. We might begin by that."

"That is a good idea!" exclaimed young Alfred. "This year I have only hunted, and I should like to try shooting small game again."

"Are there any partridges?" asked uncle Armand.

"Two or three coveys, so the keepers say."

"Well, then, we might have a pleasant time shooting among them while we are waiting for something bigger."

The party took the road on the left, and the carriage followed slowly. Germaine contrived to place herself between her uncle and Roger. Alfred walked ahead like a scout, about ten paces in front of the others, whom M. du Pomméval, not caring to remain too near the carriage, thought fit to join.

Ten minutes afterwards the guests of the Duke de Bretteville were under covert, and reached the edge of a clearing. An open growth of bush separated this clearing from the road along which vehicles could pass, a road but fifty yards away, so that Madame Daudierne and her elder daughter could from their carriage watch all the little incidents of the morning's prologue.

Roger knew the intentions of M. Daudierne, and he took care to place Alfred at the extreme left of the line of marksmen, at fifty paces at least from his uncle. He then placed M. du Pomméval on the extreme right, and Germaine in the centre, nearer to her uncle than to her suitor.

Her mother observed all these preparatory evolutions with interest, but her sister did not appear to take any pleasure in them. She looked with an absent eye at the Danish hound, which slept with its paws stretched out and its nose on the carriage rug, like a marble dog couching at the feet of some noble dame, on the tombstones of mediæval days. Laurence's face was so sad that Madame Daudierne could not help remarking it. Since Arthur du Pomméval had made a formal offer for the hand of Germaine, the good lady had abstained from questioning her elder daughter. She had carefully avoided all chance of being alone with her, and it was not from want of feeling that she did this. She was fully conscious that Laurence must have been wounded by the proceedings of the young man who had been so eager in his attentions to herself, and who had suddenly discovered that he was in love with her sister. But she felt sure that any conversation on the subject with Laurence would only aggravate a sorrow which might pass away soon enough if no one spoke of it to the sufferer.

Madame Daudierne did not realise the depth of Laurence's distress. She had never asked herself whether her daughter's heart was bleeding, and she preferred not to do so, being one of those women who do not make up their minds to believe that there is aught amiss until they are forced to do so.

Certainly, Laurence's manner had so far been calculated to reassure

her. She had not changed visibly in look or demeanour. She was as quiet as she had always been, affectionate towards her family, and did not make the slightest allusion whatever to her sister's marriage. Now, however, her features had such an expression of pain that her mother could not help intervening.

"What ails you to-day, my dear child?" she asked. "You have not spoken three words since we left La Germonière. Are you ill?"

"No, mother," replied Laurence, quietly, "I was silent, because I do not know anything about shooting-parties. The gentlemen did not talk of anything else."

"This party doesn't amuse you much, then?"

"Not at all," was Laurence's reply, "but it pleases Germaine, and I did not like to spoil her pleasure by remaining at home."

"She would have been vexed to have left you alone. She loves you dearly, as you know, my girl."

"And I love her."

"Then you are glad to see her happy?"

"I should be resigned to suffer my whole life long if I felt sure that she was happy," was Laurence's significant reply.

"Do you doubt that? Why, I have never seen her so gay," promptly said Madame Daudierne.

"She is always gay, and never thinks about the future."

"I know that you are not alike, and, between ourselves, you go to the other extreme. Chance wills it that your sister is to be married first. But that is no reason why you should despair of soon finding as desirable a suitor as Monsieur du Pomméval."

"Do you think that I am pining for him?"

"I think that you thought of him—formerly."

"I should have done very wrong in that case," replied Laurence, evasively; "and it seems to me that Germaine will do as well to think twice before marrying him."

"I agree with you on that point, my dear, and Germaine thinks the same, as she has not yet consented to do so. She wishes to know him better."

"She doesn't seem to study him much," rejoined Laurence. "And the trial cannot go on indefinitely."

"No, indeed! If the marriage is not settled before we return to Paris, it will never take place at all, and we shall go back by New-Year's day."

"If I were in Germaine's place I should make up my mind at once."

"Why? You only just now said the reverse of that."

"Not exactly, mother. I said that Germaine would do well not to engage herself hastily. She has asked time for reflection, and I approve of that. But she has not thought over the peculiar situation in which Monsieur du Pomméval is placed. He relies upon obtaining the property of his uncle, and his right to it will be disputed. You certainly seem to expect that he will gain his suit, but if he loses it, and Germaine then refuses to marry him, it will be said that the match was a mere question of money."

"That is true," replied Madame Daudierne, in a low tone. "I had not thought of that, nor, I am sure, has your sister either."

"I feel sure," resumed Laurence, "that Germaine does not wish to marry Monsieur du Pomméval, and that she will reject him when she thinks she has trifled with him long enough."

"That would be very wrong; and if I were sure it was so, I——"
"You would put an end to this dangerous childishness," interrupted Laurence. "Well, then, question Germaine; question her closely. She is incapable of falsehood, and she will tell you her whole secret; she has almost told it to me."

"Her secret? Has Germaine a secret? You almost alarm me!"

"Shall I tell you what I know about it?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well," resumed Laurence, "Germaine imagines that I love Monsieur du Pomméval, and she has told me that she doesn't love him herself. She has almost confessed to me that she loves some one else."

"Some one else! Are you thinking of what you are saying? And she encourages Monsieur du Pomméval's hopes! No! it is impossible! Germaine is sometimes frivolous and inconsiderate, but this is more than frivolity."

"Germaine has an excuse for it in her own eyes," said Laurence, hastily. "She declares—in fact, she believes that she will make Monsieur du Pomméval wish to marry me. She has taken it into her head that I love him, that he loves me, and that he will return to me when he sees that she won't marry him."

"And she keeps him about her for that purpose!" exclaimed Madame Daudierne. "She must be mad! Doesn't she understand that this young man could never become your husband after having been engaged to be married to her, and formally received as her suitor? The whole town of Arcy knows of it."

"She isn't mad; but she consults her heart, and is not quite rational in the matter. I have told her in vain that I would rather die than become the wife of Monsieur du Pomméval; but she would not listen to me. She has managed to keep away from me so as to avoid hearing what I have to say."

"How is it that you did not tell me this before, my dear Laurence?"

"Germaine made the avowal to me on the day before yesterday, and I must confess, mamma, that I hesitated about repeating it to you."

"You were wrong. It is necessary to put an end to an improper situation. This evening I will make your sister confess everything to me, and if she confesses that she is trifling with Monsieur du Pomméval, she must tell me what she wishes to effect by all this, and if she loves some one else, let her tell me who it is, and then ——"

"She will do so, no doubt. Dissimulation is not one of her faults. I greatly hope that she has made a good choice, and I trust that she may not be deceived——"

"Deceived as you have been, my dear child," murmured Madame Daudierne, who was beginning to read the heart of her elder daughter.

The guns now began firing all along the line, and Laurence thus avoided replying. The beaters had advanced to the clearing, and came forward, shouting so as to frighten the game from the dry grass and the furrows. Hares starting from their seats, fled before the noise, and tried to take refuge in the woods. It was thus easy to kill them at short range. Partridges fled in coveys, and passed by as swiftly as bullets, forty feet in the air. It was a rolling fire, a shower of shot which did not always have effect, for firing in a battue is not so easy as it seems. The sportsmen had scarcely time to reload, and above them little puffs of white smoke were continually hovering. It looked like an engagement with a vanguard.

All that was wanting in the picture was some red trousers in the plain, and some Prussian helmets on the verge of the woods.

Germaine did her share in the business with extreme ardour and astonishing skill. It was wonderful to see her work her gun, fumble in her cartridge-bag, slip in the cartridges, take aim, fire her two shots, and recommence the same performance as though she had done nothing else all her life.

Madame Daudierne was lost in astonishment. She had never seen anything of the kind before, and could not understand how it was that her daughter took such pleasure in so murderous an amusement. Laurence did not look on. She was busy in holding Belt back, for he had started up at the first shots, and seemed anxious to rush to the spot where the firing was going on.

But the first skirmish was not of long duration. It did not take much time to beat up a space of four acres or so, and the beaters soon came within range of the marksmen, who were obliged to stop firing for fear of accident. Alfred let fly a few superfluous shots, but, by good luck, he hit no one.

Roger Pontac, seconded by the keeper, had directed the battue carefully, and given orders that the hares which had been killed should be collected. There were but two partridges remaining behind, and these Mademoiselle Germaine had killed. She was now returning triumphantly with her gun upon her shoulder, her Brittany hat tipped over her ear, her cheeks ablaze, her eyes sparkling, and her gestures animated. The gentlemen were following her at a distance, and were talking over the incidents of the shooting, when Pontac hurried forward to meet them.

"Nine hares, all by myself," she called out to her mother, running to the road where the carriage stood. "It seems to me that this is a good opening. My uncle hasn't missed a shot, but Alfred only hit once in ten times, and Monsieur du Pomméval is a perfect clown at it. He might as well have stayed away, and have given his '*choke-bored*' gun to Monsieur Pontac."

"Really, I don't know you any more," said Madame Daudierne, sternly. "You no longer talk like a woman."

"At a shooting-party there are none but sportsmen," replied Germaine, laughing.

"Pray behave yourself," rejoined her mother, drily, "or you will force me to curtail a party which you make me regret having joined. I wish, besides, to go back early to La Germonière, for I have to talk to you about some serious matters."

"I am quite willing, but you forget that we have company. My uncle invited Monsieur du Pomméval and Monsieur Pontac. He would invite the Duke de Bretteville if he dared."

All this did not please Madame Daudierne, and she was probably about to give vent to her vexation, but the gentlemen came up just in time to prevent her from reproving her daughter again. Pontac was behind, and Germaine was in such haste to thank him that she went back to call out: "Wonderful! admirable! I never enjoyed myself so much."

The lieutenant blushed, and stammered out an awkward compliment. He seemed so constrained that Laurence said to herself: "Can she love this officer? She almost embraced him, and he looks as though he were afraid of betraying that he is in love with her."

"Well, my dear Reine, what do you say to this amusement?" exclaimed

uncle Armand. "The most amiable of lieutenants prepared a royal chase for us, but you don't appear to be enthusiastic about it."

"I am afraid that Laurence isn't well," replied Madame Daudierne, who was trying to find a pretext to take her daughters home.

"Indeed! She must have caught cold by sitting motionless in the carriage, and you may do the same. You ought to walk a little. Why don't you go up to the Fairy's Rock?"

"The space which we are now about to beat up is over that way," said Roger Pontac. "It is near the main road——"

"Which runs at the foot of the rock," interrupted M. Armand.

"I am not very fond of shooting-parties, but I dislike going up high hills still more," remarked Madame Daudierne.

"I will not insist, then. But we should be very much vexed to tire you and Laurence. If you should like to take the carriage back to La Germonière, don't hesitate, for we can walk back; can't we, Germaine?"

"I should say so, indeed," she exclaimed. "I never feel tired when I am happy, and to-day I am as merry as I can be."

It was easy to see that what she said was true, for she looked so contented that her mother, who idolised her, did not venture to scold, or even to contradict her any more. "We will remain to the end," said she. "I will only ask you not to stay too late."

"We shall be at home in an hour or two, my dear sister. Our friend Pontac will lead the battues with 'military precision.' March, lieutenant, and double-quick time!"

They returned to the semi-circular clearing, where the lunch still awaited them, and Roger placed the marksmen along a narrow strip of ground which overlooked the public road, and extended to the verge of the forest.

The latter had an imposing aspect as thus seen, and Germaine had once admired it from the Roche-de-Lémon. It was not a succession of thickets, like most woods of the district. The ancestors of the Duke de Bretteville had made openings through it such as are only suited to lordly forests. At the end of every twenty years only trunks of a certain thickness were respected, all the smaller trees being felled. The chosen ones grew up unharmed, and became magnificent in the course of time, as they thus obtained a full share of air and sunlight, at least those which had remained erect after half a century; for every ten years clearings were made again, and the weaker growths disappeared. It is partly due to this system of felling that the superb trees of the forests of Fontainebleau and Compiègne have become what they are. But a farmer would not profit by such a course, for the faggots which are furnished by a thickly-grown wood are sold yearly, while these giants of the vegetable kingdom only serve to charm the eyes of landscape painters until the day of their downfall.

The space now about to be beaten up was entirely planted with beeches, almost all of them a hundred years old. Their white trunks rose from place to place, like enormous columns supporting an endless vault. The intervening soil was carpeted with moss, and covered with strong ferns, tall enough to hide deer. And those of La Bretèche were so seldom hunted that they voluntarily came here from the thicker coverts which the bushy corners of the forest afforded. They were seen wandering about in little groups, and sometimes even repaired to the outskirts of the unfrequented road which ran from La Germonière to Bretteville.

The carriage had taken up its position on this road, and Pontac had gone to meet his beaters, who had to wind round in order to find the best side of the inclosure and include in the battue certain haunts, where the big game gathered by choice, and urge it towards the angle where the marksmen were waiting for it.

They were posted in the same order as before. Alfred and M. du Pomméval were at the two extremities of the line, and Germaine and uncle Armand were in the centre. This time both Madame Daudierne and Laurence would be close to the slaughter which was about to take place.

It was a moment such as agitates even old sportsmen not a little, for they feel the emotion of expectation. They don't know whether luck will be theirs or not, and they are like gamblers at a roulette table looking at the turnings of the cylinder. Just as the ivory ball falls by chance into one of the numbered holes, just so the roes may run against the legs of the inexperienced marksman who misses them, or present themselves on the contrary, within range of the best shot of the party. It is a matter of luck, and the most skilful may return home without a good shot if the game does not pass under his fire. That, indeed often happens, and everything depends on the animals, and not the sportsmen, in such cases.

Everybody was now making ready to profit by the lucky chances which fate might offer. Germaine, with her gun at rest, her eye and ear on the alert, felt her heart throb with hope and pleasure. But her sporting predilections did not so possess her as to make her forget Roger. She was thankful to him for playing so modest a part, and the more she compared him to M. du Pomméval the more superior she thought him to the provincial dandy, who had never done anything but spend his money to make a show in the country round, and who, nevertheless, thought himself irresistible. She went even so far as to ask herself whether it was not time to declare to her mother that she would not marry the lord of Le Fougeray on any terms, and that she wished to relinquish the honour in favour of her elder sister.

There was another avowal that she might have made, but this was more difficult to make. She would have suffered in confessing that she loved a hussar on furlough, a bird of passage, almost a perfect stranger, for she had only seen him on four occasions. The time for doing so had not yet come, that she well knew. She must wait. For what? She knew not. Perhaps for one of those events such as happen only in romance—a touch of a fairy wand transforming the poor officer into a millionaire, the labourer's son into a landowner.

Germaine did not know that Madame Daudierne had made up her mind to force her to speak out that very evening. But she took good care not to go near the carriage again. Motionless, and with her back to a huge tree, she was waiting for one of these warning sounds which tell one that the game is near, such as a noise of rustling leaves or a stir among the dry grass.

All at once the silence of the forest was broken by the cries of the beaters, and immediately afterwards, at thirty paces from the edge of the wood, above a tall tuft of ferns yellow with autumn, there appeared a roe's delicate head. The animal did not see Germaine, but she saw it well. She raised her gun quickly to her shoulder and was about to fire, when the graceful creature turned its head towards the spot where she was standing, and looked at her with its large soft black eyes, but did not start away.

It perhaps mistook her for one of the little cow-boys who often watered their kine at the pools beside the road.

"No," she murmured, lowering her gun, "I cannot have the cruelty to kill it while it stands there at rest. I will wait till it starts, and if it is able to save itself, so much the better. I don't want to kill it, and I hope that Alfred will not see it, for he will fire at it, and he shoots so badly that he will lame it only."

Germaine was sincerely touched, although she had eagerly been killing many hares and partridges quite as interesting as the roe. Pity is a very complex feeling, and depends upon many circumstances. It is easily set aside and easily aroused. At the end of a fierce combat the least ferocious soldier will, without hesitation, kill a man whom he would have helped had he met him on the eve of the fray. Wholesale slaughter makes less impression than one murder. The question is one in which the nerves are concerned. Cries of suffering touch the hardest hearts, but the pangs of the uncomplaining pass unheeded. No one pities the horrible agony of a lobster thrown alive into boiling water. There is, besides, the influence of external form which causes the lovely butterfly to be spared and the ugly spider to be crushed.

Germaine's sensitiveness had not yet been greatly put to the proof. The running hare, the flying partridge, falling under the fire of the sportsman and far from him, are not beheld in their dying convulsions. At a battue, the marksman is not even obliged to soil his hands with their blood, as hirelings are at hand to pick them up. But this was not the question now. It was whether Germaine should fire upon an animal which did not attempt to fly. In war, when an action has not yet begun, a sentinel does not amuse himself by firing upon the sentinel of the enemy in front of him. There is a tacit treaty between these soldiers, whom the beating of the drums sounding the charge will presently induce to rush upon one another with fixed bayonets. And thus in shooting, it is admitted that no one ought to abuse his advantages by firing at a motionless mark. One might as well fire at a target. A roe which does not stir is one of heaven's creatures; it is admired and let alone. Let it begin to run, however, and it becomes "game," and is shot without scruple or regret.

This time the suspension of arms did not last long. The cries of the peasants became more distinct, and the noise of their sticks striking the branches of the trees and the underbrush was distinctly heard. Three or four roes which were browsing near by, in the dry grass, started at the same moment and fled in every direction. The luckiest rushed through the forest and avoided the fire of the sportsmen, posted along the verge of the wood. Germaine's roe alone had the ill fortune to force the line and come between her and her brother.

She had not the time or perhaps the courage to fire, but Alfred did so, at the risk of wounding Germaine, and, by chance, he hit the animal.

The poor creature struck on its side, as it bounded upon the road, fell, rose, and dragged itself to the carriage where Madame Daudierne and her elder daughter were seated.

"Mine! it is mine!" called out the inexperienced sportsman, as loud as he could yell.

"Hold your tongue!" replied uncle Armand from afar; "if you go on shouting like that we sha'n't see even a rabbit. There he goes now!" added the old bachelor, angrily; "he is leaving his place. The young rascal will spoil all the sport!"

This was true. Forgetting the fundamental rules of shooting at a battue, and the wise recommendations of M. Daudierne, Alfred's first thought had been to run after his roe. Did he mean to carry it off or dispatch it? He did not know himself; success had turned his head.

The stricken roe was kicking desperately, and uttering plaintive cries like a child.

"Oh, this is horrible!" exclaimed Laurence, turning away her eyes so as to avoid seeing it. "I cannot look at it!" And she opened the carriage door to get out.

Belt did not lose a second. Before his mistress had risen he was already on the turf.

"Call off your dog!" shrieked Alfred; "take him away or I'll kill him!"

"Jean," said Madame Daudierne to her coachman, "go forward a little. We are too near the sportsmen. Go to the entrance of the place, where the roads meet."

"You are right, madame," said Jean, who was an old family servant and spoke his mind. "I heard the balls whistling near by, and my mares may get hit."

It was not by any means a superfluous precaution for Madame Daudierne to change her place, on account of the ardour and unskilfulness of young Alfred; but, if she insisted upon moving away, it was to avoid the painful sight of the death of an inoffensive animal. Like her daughter, she did not care to witness bloodshed, and the poor roe was bleeding freely.

"I will not remain here a moment more," said Laurence, as soon as the carriage had taken up a position at the corner of the road.

"I ask nothing better than to go home," rejoined Madame Daudierne, "but I cannot leave Germaine alone to end this day of folly. She is very much excited, and will come to harm, I fear."

"I think that you would do well to watch her, mamma, but my presence is useless," replied Laurence, "and I may as well avoid seeing sights that disgust me. I am going as far as that rock."

"Alone?"

"I should be glad to go with you, but you could not go up without tiring yourself too much. I run no risk, for Belt will go with me. Besides, you won't lose sight of me."

The eminence, crowned by the Roche-de-Lémon, overlooked the road, directly in front of the obelisk, so Madame Daudierne, from the carriage in which she was seated, could, indeed, follow her elder daughter with her eyes as she ascended the peak where Germaine had one evening met Roger Pontac, and, by turning the other way, the good lady could also watch over the younger girl, who was posted at a hundred paces on the right.

"If you promise me to be prudent, and not to go too far off," she said, "I am not opposed to your attempting to climb the hill, although it would be wiser not to do so."

"I will not go beyond the peak which you see from here, and I will return when the shooting is over."

"Unfortunately, this is only the beginning."

This was indeed the case. The beaters were coming up and a few does passed near, at which another fusillade began, without effect, however.

"Come, Belt!" cried Laurence to her dog, which seemed to hesitate. "Come with me, or they will kill you."

The Danish hound was not a sporting dog, and he therefore followed the young girl willingly at a gesture from her.

"Why did I come?" she thought, walking hastily towards the destination she had chosen, although she had not the least wish to consult the oracle. "This organised extermination of poor animals sickens me, and Germaine must be crazy to like it—crazier than she was when she started for the Fairy Rock. I am going there, but it is merely to avoid this odious sport. They won't tell me the name of my future husband, for I shall never, never marry."

Laurence now went up the hill without turning to look back, even when she was obliged to pause to take breath. She did not wish to see the feast spread out, the white clouds issuing from the gun barrels, the carriages, or the liveries which reminded her that M. du Pomméval was there, and that she would be obliged to see him again when she went back.

She went away to forget, and her thoughts gradually took another direction. The pure air of the heights felt cool upon her burning brow, and she presently began to admire the superb picture which rose before her eyes. The forest now looked like a dark mass, and she heard nothing but a far-off crackling instead of the full report of the firing. The rock rose up, dark and bleak. The sky was a pale blue, as is usual on fine autumnal days. An eagle was soaring above the pile of granite, and a breeze stirred the ferns which carpeted the soil of the solitary spot.

Laurence felt herself revive, and she was now anxious to see the cleft made so poetic by a legend which had begun to interest her.

Belt also seemed impatient to reach the top of the wild hill. He ran on with his head in the air, and sometimes stopped to give a joyous bark. He reached the foot of the rock the first, pausing at the very spot where Roger Pontac had stood while Germaine questioned the fairies at the aperture on the opposite side of the square stone, and he now stopped with his head thrown back, as setters do when they scent a covey of partridges.

"What is the matter with you?" asked Laurence, who, although she knew his ways, was surprised by his present demeanour.

Five feet above the base of the square rock a fissure started, a fissure much of the same width as a loop-hole made in the walls of a mediæval chateau. This opening was too high up for the young girl to look into it. Roger Pontac had used it as a speaking-trumpet to reply to Germaine, but he was of the regulation height for a cuirassier, and if he had preferred to be a hussar it was only because the heavy cavalry was never called upon to fight in Africa.

Laurence, who was greatly astonished at Belt's immobility, wondered whether he had found an acquaintance, but it seemed unlikely that any one was hidden in this retreat, and she did not dwell on the thought, but began to walk round the hole raised by nature's hand.

Before doing so, however, she looked below her, and saw that the sportsmen, the servants, and the carriage were where she had left them. Her mother waved a handkerchief to let her know that she was watching her movements, and this signal reminded Laurence that she had promised not to go beyond the peak, so she gave up the idea of attempting to make a complete examination of the fairies' palace. She was, besides, beginning to feel some apprehension. She decided to go no further than the angle of the massive rock, and, on doing so, was not a little surprised to find

herself in front of a much wider crevice than the first, and one much more accessible to her. The appearance of this black hole seemed strange, and Laurence took care not to go too near it, like Germaine, who was more curious and less timid, had done. She, indeed, called her dog, who would defend her in the improbable contingency of her being attacked.

Belt did not obey her as usual, but at last he made up his mind to leave his post, and came along looking about him, putting his nose to the moss, and behaving as though he were searching for the track of a friend. He soon paused before the open fissure, barked sharply, and then with one bound dashed into the depths of the cavern.

Laurence, amazed and frightened, instinctively shrank back and was about to fly. But she had not the strength to run or the voice to call out for help. Belt had disappeared; he no longer made a sound. He had forced the entrance of the fairies' subterranean abode, and the fairies were keeping him prisoner to punish his audacity.

This fancy, which would probably have amused Germaine, did not even occur to the quieter and more rational mind of Laurence, but she was none the less afraid. There was evidently some one there, and Belt knew him. "If it were Roch Ferrer," thought the young girl, "I should then understand why Belt rushed into the hole; but what is Roch Ferrer doing there, if it be he? He promised me that he would go to Monsieur Pontac at the Château de Bretteville, and he must have gone there yesterday. If he didn't why should he be here hiding? Can he have learned that he is being looked for to be arrested and put in prison? No, for I told him that we should be shooting to-day at La Bretèche, and he could not have guessed that I should come up here."

Laurence had just reached this point of her reflections when her dog bounded from the cavern, and came forward to the spot where she stood.

"Where have you been, you bad dog?" she asked.

Belt took care not to bark in reply, for in his mouth he held an object which he would not drop; he was bringing it to his mistress, and allowed her to take it from him.

It was a kind of case, or rather portfolio made of doeskin, with a steel button which covered a spring fastening. The case was square and must have been worn like a scapulary, for there were two rings which held the two upper corners, and to these hung strips of leather. How had it chanced to be in the hole in the rock? Who had hidden it there? By what prodigy of instinct had Belt gone there to look for it? All these questions came to the mind of Laurence at once, and she did not know how to reply to them, but began to turn the portfolio over and over, and at last discovered two initials printed in black. They were two V's.

She then remembered that Madame Vignemal was named Virginie. Germaine had often joked about this sentimental name, which was not at all suited to the somewhat vulgar owner of Le Fougeray. And then Laurence also remembered the story told by the poacher on the slope of the Beuvron.

"This is the bag which he found under the tamarisk, where Madame Vignemal dropped it," she said to herself. "He told me that he had placed it where no one would find it. No one, indeed, would have thought of going into this hollow rock for it. Roch Ferrer, who goes about everywhere, must know the Roche-de-Lémon. He came here expressly to hide this relic of the dead woman. He did not think that Belt would find it and bring it to me."

What Laurence thought was at least probable. But what should she

do with this case, which evidently contained papers of importance, and perhaps deeds? Should she throw it back into the black hole where the Danish hound had found it? This was Mademoiselle Daudierne's first impulse, but she soon realised that she had no right to do so. This waif of the waves had a value to the testamentary heir or the heirs-at-law. To throw it aside would be equivalent to wronging some one; for one of two things would happen: either it would rot away without doing any one any good, or it would fall into the hands of some peasant girl who might come to the rock to consult the fairies, and, in such a case, there was no certainty that the object would reach its proper destination. Roch Ferrer had certainly renounced any idea of using it, since he had rid himself of it, and, besides, he was about to leave the country for a long time, probably for ever.

"The secret of the inheritance is perhaps inside it," said Laurence to herself, feeling the little doeskin bag, "and it depends on me whether it will ever be known. But if chance brought me here, it is because Heaven wills it that I should interfere. How can I do so? I would not for any thing in the world open this case which a poacher has respected. Give it to Pomméval, who would not hesitate to destroy it, if, on opening it, he saw that he had an interest in doing so? No, no, never! I would not, even indirectly, be the cause of the ruin of people who are better than he; and, on the other hand, if I showed my 'treasure-trove' to one of the magistrates who will try the suit between those who claim the property, I should be obliged to reply to questions which they would certainly put to me, and, as I cannot lie, I should be obliged to repeat to them what this unlucky young man told me, and so ruin him and seriously compromise myself. All that would be remembered, of what I might declare, would be that I had an interview with him at night, and the reasons for it would not be considered."

Belt, crouching down beside his mistress, was gazing at her. One might almost have fancied that he was simply waiting for an order to carry the case back to the place from which he had taken it, and indeed, Laurence for a moment thought of using him as a messenger, and giving him the portfolio to take it wherever his instinct might bid him. This would have been a very original way of getting rid of all responsibility; but it did not solve the problem, for Belt might let the portfolio fall on the grass or the road, and he was as likely to let the first comer who caressed him take it—uncle Armand, for instance, or M. du Pomméval, which would be worse yet.

In the midst of her perplexity, and at its worst point, Laurence looked up and saw two eyes shining in the depths of the cavern. A man was there, standing, and his figure fitted the opening in the rock like the statue of a saint fits a niche. He advanced noiselessly to the entrance of the fairies' abode, and soon stood in full light. But Laurence did not recognise him at first; she only saw his eyes, and she recoiled in terror.

"Do not be afraid, mademoiselle," said a voice which made her start. "I wish to speak to you, but I should not like to be seen by the people who have their eyes on us."

"You here!" exclaimed Laurence, trying to recover her composure. "What are you doing in this place?"

"I am hiding myself," replied Roch Ferrer. "I know that I am being looked for, but I shall not be found. To-morrow I shall be far away. But I hadn't the courage to go away without seeing you. I thought that

you might wish to see the Roche-de-Lémon. If you had not come up here I should have asked Monsieur Subligny to bring you to-night to the Beuvron banks."

"Monsieur Subligny! you have told him then——"

"Nothing, except that I love you; and that for years I have been following you about everywhere," replied Roch Ferrer. "I told him that I had never ventured to speak to you."

"It is too much to have told him that you——"

"What does it matter since I am going away? I am going to Africa, and I shall never return from there."

"You have seen Monsieur Pontac, then?"

"Yes, I saw him this morning at the place where we now are. He comes here every day, and I slept last night in the fairies' grotto. He promised me that he would give me some money to-night, some clothes as well, and a letter of recommendation to the colonel of his regiment. In eight days from now, I shall be a soldier."

"That is well done, sir," replied the young girl, who was really much affected. "I forgive you for the fright which you caused me just now, and I give you my good wishes, as regards the new career before you."

"I may hope, then, that you will not forget me."

"Forget you? Oh no! I shall always remember that you offered yourself as a sacrifice to grant a wish of mine which I no longer have."

"Is it really true that you no longer want that hateful man to lose the inheritance which he hopes for?" asked Roch.

"It is so true," replied Laurence, "that I will give you back the portfolio belonging to Madame Vignemal. You can do what you like with it. I am quite indifferent to Monsieur du Pomméval."

"I know that it isn't you whom he is going to marry," said Roch; "in fact, the major told me so."

"Who is the major?"

"Dr. Subligny. But he also said that he was going to marry your sister, and that is why I gave the bag to Belt. From me you might perhaps have refused to take it, and I cannot keep it. If you don't wish to open it, give it to Monsieur Subligny."

"It would be better that you should give it to him yourself."

"I shall not see him again. I intended to go to his house to-morrow. But if I went to Arcy I should be arrested. I am watched. Monsieur Pontac promised me to explain to the major why I am going away to-night, and I am sure that he will approve of it. If you don't wish to let him know that we have met, tell him that your dog found the bag in the hollow where I hid it. Monsieur Subligny now knows all about the accident of the ferry-boat. He knows that Madame Vignemal, at the moment when the boat was being carried away, at once thought of the bag which she carried in her bosom; that she tore it from her neck, clutched hold of it with her right hand, and did not even relinquish her grasp upon it when she fainted. If she was so anxious to prevent it from sinking to the bottom of the river, it must be that there is something of importance inside it. The major believes that there is, and so do I. I therefore thought that I could not keep it any longer. It seems that if this man Pomméval does not inherit the money, it will go to Monsieur Pontac and other heirs."

"Monsieur Pontac! You must be mistaken."

"No, mademoiselle. Monsieur Pontac is a relative of Madame Vignemal."

"We did not know that," said Laurence, in a low tone. "This is strange!"

"The major could have told you, for he knew Monsieur Pontac when he was at college," rejoined Roch Ferrer. "Madame Vignemal placed him there, but he ran away one day and enlisted as a common soldier."

"Yes, I remember now," said Laurence, "the doctor told us that story. It seems to me that he told us the name of Madame Vignemal's relative, but none of us remembered it. But in that case Monsieur Pontac ought to have what you have found. He is more interested than any one else in knowing whether his relative made her will again or not."

"I thought of what you say, but I was afraid of going against your wishes," replied the young poacher, in a humble voice.

"My wishes? What does it matter to me whether Monsieur du Pomméval becomes rich or remains as he is?" asked Laurence.

"It does not matter to you, but it does to your sister," was the retort.

"My sister does not love him."

"But they wish to make her marry him, perhaps?" exclaimed Roch Ferrer. "Ah! I am glad, indeed, that I offered the case to Monsieur Pontac."

"Did you do that?"

"Yes, I confess that I did. I hate this Monsieur du Pomméval, and I should have liked to spoil his game. That was wrong on my part, no doubt. I ought to have consulted you before speaking to Monsieur Pontac."

"You told him, then, how this object had come into your possession?"

"I told him all."

"Well?"

"He refused to take it."

"It is a fortune, perhaps, which he has rejected—and he is poor," observed Laurence slowly, as if deep in thought.

"He has his pay, and he does not care for money," said Roch. "I tried in vain to talk to him. I could not make him listen. I told him that I should send the case to Monsieur Subligny, who would open it, and he answered that I could do as I pleased, provided that he heard no more about the money. He has refused to have anything to do with the other cousins, who wanted to persuade him to join them in a lawsuit."

"Then there are some noble hearts left," murmured the young girl.

"Will you still refuse to rely upon Monsieur Subligny's opinion?" asked Roch Ferrer, gently.

"No," replied Laurence, in a firm tone. "Whatever may happen, I shall have done my duty, and it is sweet to think that you are preserved from pursuit and from slander."

Roch fell upon his knees. He was weeping.

"Farewell," resumed Mademoiselle Daudierne. "And if we never meet again, remember that in France, the land of your love, there is one who prays for you. And now," she added, "rise, sir! No one should kneel except to God."

Roch Ferrer obeyed her. He stood up and remained motionless, his figure upright, his head thrown back, and his eyes fixed upon the young girl. Those large, speaking black eyes of his were full of tears.

"You are going to leave me?" he said, in a stifled tone.

"I must do so. They are calling to me," replied Mademoiselle Daudierne, promptly.

It was not a mere excuse to be gone, for Laurence's mother was making repeated signs to her, almost imperative ones, to bid her return.

"Have you nothing more to say to me?" asked the gipsy.

"I have but one word to say: 'Courage!'"

"Courage! I have courage, since I am going away from you. But I have one favour to ask of you."

"Speak!"

"I beg of you to allow me to write to you—oh! not to your house—I will direct my letters to Dr. Subigny, who will read them, so that you may rely upon their containing nothing that could give you offence," continued Roch, impulsively.

"The doctor knows that——"

"That I love you madly, and that, if I consent to change my lot and to renounce my liberty, it is because you wish it. He will not be surprised to see that I am consecrating my life to you, the new life which I accept in obedience to your wishes. You told me to retrieve my past, you showed me the road to follow to deserve your pardon—will you not allow me to tell you from afar: 'I am following the path which you have traced out for me?'"

"Nothing that happens to you will be deficient in interest to me," replied Laurence. "I shall be happy to learn that you have become a brave soldier, and when, like Monsieur Pontac, you have won your epaulets, I shall be proud at having guessed rightly that you would prove a brave man. I must always know where you are," added Laurence, gaily. "Write to the doctor, write to him often. He will tell me all about you, and will answer you in my place. You will like to know whether I am still alive, will you not?"

"Yes, for if you die I shall try to be killed, so that I may not survive you," was Roch's answer, spoken in an earnest voice.

"I have no wish to die," said Mademoiselle Daudierne, "and I feel sure that I shall see you soon again. It is Heaven that inspired you with the wish to go away. Heaven will some day bring you back to France, where you leave friends behind you. That day our house will be open to you, and nothing need then prevent me from telling my mother that when Lieutenant Ferrer was only a poacher I had a long interview with him at the foot of the Fairy's Rock."

This was said smilingly, and in a careless tone, which ill agreed with the emotion that Laurence really felt, but did not wish to show. She was not sufficiently sure of not betraying herself to tolerate a scene of impassioned farewell, and yet did not wish that Roch should leave her in despair. Education and the habits of society are of great assistance in trying moments, even though the society be that of the middle class, and Mademoiselle Daudierne had at once found the proper manner of speaking.

She made haste to escape the situation, as she had now succeeded in preventing the scene from going too far, or becoming ridiculous. Whether Roch disappeared into the depths of the cavern again, or came out from it to kiss Laurence's hand, as he had done on the verge of the Bois-du-Tertre, the adventure would become absurd. He felt this, and did not stir. It was necessary to end the interview at once.

"Farewell, sir," said she, patting Belt, and pointing to the crevice. Belt understood her. He crossed the space with one bound, and rising upon his hind paws he stretched out his head to Roch, who covered it with kisses, for he, too, had understood. "Yes, farewell till we meet again,"

added the young girl. "In two years, in five or in ten, we shall meet here again, if you wish. I will wait for you to tell me when, through our friend, the doctor. We shall perhaps not know one another, for I shall no longer be young, and you will be a fine officer. Only hearts remain unchanged."

"They will not change," murmured Roch, despondently, "I shall always love you, and you will never love me."

"Who can tell?" replied Laurence.

The reply had a double meaning, and did not commit her at all. She regretted, however, that it had escaped her, and in order to avoid any further explanation, she went rapidly down the hill.

Roch had the courage to remain behind. He had taken what she had said as an encouragement, and a hope remained to him. Mademoiselle Daudierne had not pledged herself, but she did not go away as she had come. Her interview with the poacher had agitated her. She saw him now under a new aspect. He was no longer the vagabond, the prowler, whose first appearance before her had frightened her so much. He was a brave and energetic young man, who only asked to live for her and to die for France, and she prayed that he might live. Besides, she brought away with her the mysterious case, the opening of which might reveal the last and well-considered wishes of Madame Vignemal. Laurence did not yet know what she should do with it, but she did not throw it aside into the heather for the first passer-by to pick up. She slipped it into her bosom without remembering that the dead woman also had worn it about her. She was indeed too occupied with her thoughts to be superstitious about it.

Madame Daudierne had not left the carriage, but it was no longer in the same place. It stood on the opposite side of the open space, as far as possible from the enclosure where the great battue was going on, and the compassionate lady of La Germonière was seated in such a way as to turn her back upon the slaughterers. The scene of the dying roe had been several times all but renewed under her eyes since Laurence had left her, and she did not wish to be exposed to it in spite of herself.

At the edge of the wood a rolling fire could be heard. The beaters had completed their task, and the poor animals they had been chasing came in terror to seek a refuge near the sportsmen, who but seldom missed their aim. Even Alfred himself killed something almost every time. The butchery had, however, begun to disgust Germaine, and she had already several times disdained to fire upon a roe, which she could easily have killed had she wished it. Fortunately, the carnage was nearly over. The line of beaters was drawn to a meeting point. They could be seen among the trees, with Roger Pontac at their head.

When Laurence reached the bottom of the hill, she at once stopped her ears and averted her eyes, and then crossed the open space to join her mother. "I am utterly sick of this sport," said Madame Daudierne to her, "and I shall not remain until the end. At the first interval in this abominable tragedy, as I call it, I shall call Germaine and take her with us to La Germonière. The gentlemen can do without us."

"But Germaine won't be pleased to leave them," replied Laurence.

"She must make up her mind to it, however," was Madame Daudierne's rejoinder, "and I shall have a serious talk with her this evening. Our connection with Monsieur du Pomméval cannot continue on the footing of the past. After what you have told me of your sister's plans, I am anxious to return home. I was waiting for you with the greatest impatience. What were you doing up there? You stayed a very long time."

"Long enough to look at the rock, which is a great curiosity," said Laurence, with a shade of embarrassment.

"Belt was running about, too, according to his usual habits, and couldn't be controlled. I saw him from here, but it seemed to me that he ran away a long distance from you, for he disappeared for some time."

"There is a cavern in the fairy rock. Belt darted into it, and I thought for awhile that I shouldn't see him again. At last I coaxed him back, however, and he won't leave us now, for he does not like the smell of powder."

"I am glad of it. But what is that noise? Good heavens! can any of our party be in danger? Who knows what those peasants may have started! Perhaps they have roused a wild boar or a wolf."

"No, no; it was only the other day that uncle Armand said that there were no wild boars in the forest of La Bretèche, and the few wolves in this part of France always run away when they see several people together."

Laurence was right, but had she listened more attentively she would have realised what had happened.

The last roes were scampering away, and the sportsmen were firing a few final shots, when Roger, in a sonorous voice, announced: "A stag!—towards you!—don't fire!"

The recommendation was not superfluous, for the psychological moment had arrived at which guns seemingly went off spontaneously.

The stag had suddenly started from its bushy hiding-place without being disturbed by the noise around, as it did not hear the barking of any dogs, and thus did not anticipate being chased. But Roger Pontac had come upon it just as it started off leisurely enough towards the shooting party.

Pontac, who had at once recognised the "ten horn" spoken of before the battue, did not content himself with calling out to stop the firing. He was afraid that one or another of his visitors might forget his previous orders in a moment of excitement, and so, the better to protect the king of the forest, he ran swiftly after it, reiterating in a loud voice the order not to fire.

Everything went well at first. The stag, leaving the beaters on the left, approached to within thirty paces of Monsieur du Pomméval, twenty of Monsieur Daudierne, and ten of Germaine, who all three remained still. Handsome Arthur and uncle Armand knew how to obey orders while on a shooting expedition, while Germaine, who was less experienced, only thought of admiring the noble animal which did not deign to turn aside, but went straight towards Alfred, who was posted thirty paces further on. It was easy to see that it was making ready to leap out upon the road, follow it for some distance, and return into the woods.

This way of proceeding, familiar to old stags, ought to have proved successful, but it was written that the day should end in a dramatic manner.

At the very moment when the animal was about to pass Germaine the report of a gun was heard, and the stag, wounded in the left shoulder, stopped and staggered. It did not see Alfred, who fired, but it perceived Germaine, and rushed upon her with its head lowered. She would have been killed at once had she not had the presence of mind to take refuge behind the trunk of the beech tree, against which she had been leaning.

The stag, which had gone on ahead, impelled by the velocity of its course, soon wheeled round, and renewed the attack with still greater fury. Alfred had completely lost his head, M. du Pomméval was at the

other end of the line, and M. Daudierne, although at a good distance for firing, did not dare do so for fear of hitting his niece. His gun, besides, was loaded with number four shot, which, though good enough for a roe, is much too small for a full-grown stag. Germaine again screened herself behind the tree and the manœuvre succeeded. Indeed it was the only chance she had left, for had she started to run, the infuriated animal would have overtaken her at a single bound.

Renewing its attempts, it still missed her, but each time its leaps brought it nearer, while the young girl's strength was giving out. The terrible antlers had touched her once already, but only a rent had been made in her Breton jacket, and she had not yet lost heart. Unfortunately, her foot slipped on the moss, and she fell. Then, indeed, she felt that she was lost, but before closing her eyes, so that she might not see the stag rush upon her, she espied Roger Pontac running up, and began to hope that he would save her from this frightful death.

"Help!" she cried, in a faint voice.

Then came a terrible moment to all who viewed this thrilling scene. Reduced to powerlessness for want of a steel weapon, and paralysed by horror, they all realised that Lieutenant Pontac was the only person who could possibly help Germaine.

Roger carried no gun, and even if he had had one, he could not have used it without risk of killing the young girl, for the stag was almost upon her; but he had a hunting-knife, not one of those daggers placed for mere show in the belts of novices, but a real knife which the head gamekeeper had lent him—a solid weapon sharp and pointed, which had already despatched a few stags and boars. As soon as Roger espied the stag, he had thought of the danger which now threatened Germaine. It sufficed that a shot should have been fired in spite of the warning—and a badly directed one—for the animal to throw himself upon the nearest of the party. Fearing this, Roger had set off at a swift run, well knowing that if the animal scampered away without accident he should not overtake it, but hoping that he would come up in time to intervene if it stopped for an assault.

The contingency he had foreseen had actually occurred, and it was Germaine Daudierne who was threatened. Fortunately she had self-possession enough to avoid the first onset, and when she fell, Roger was but a few steps from the stag. At the very moment when she cried out "Help!" he seized the furious animal by the antlers, and averted the blow which would have crushed poor Germaine's breast bone.

Held by the young officer's iron wrists, the stag bent its fore legs, and fell on its knees, but it was not yet conquered. It strove to rid itself of the enemy, by shaking its horns and rising and felling him to the earth. If Roger let go his hold he was lost; but fortunately he held on. Kneeling with his hunting-knife between his teeth, he weighed with all his might upon the stag, until he forced it upon its side.

He succeeded in doing so, after a struggle of a few moments, which would have sufficed to save the young girl had she wished to fly, for she had risen to her feet and might have got out of the way while her defender fought for her. The stag, hit by the bullet fired by the imprudent Alfred, was not seriously wounded, but it had lost a good deal of blood, and its strength was failing. It yielded at last, and Roger was able to set his knee upon its throat, to seize his knife in his right hand and strike "home." The weapon went in up to the hilt, and he did not with-

draw it. The animal was dead. A last convulsion almost overthrew the young officer, and then all was over.

He rose at once and hastened towards Germaine, who awaited him, pale and trembling. Her uncle came up, followed by Pomméval. Alfred, almost wild with terror, had gone to apprise Madame Daudierne of Germaine's danger.

"Thanks !" murmured the young girl, extending her hand to the man she loved.

She could not do less, but she involuntarily did much more. Her strength suddenly gave way, and she would have fallen had not Roger caught her in his arms. She let him clasp her figure unresistingly, and her mother, sister, uncle, brother, and suitor, came up just in time to see her head resting upon the shoulder of the young lieutenant, who was sustaining her.

It would be difficult to describe the scene that followed, the fright of Madame Daudierne, the astonishment of Laurence, the startled look on Alfred's face, uncle Armand's emotion, and the vexation of Arthur du Pomméval.

The hero of the adventure did not know which way to look or whom to answer, for everybody questioned him at once. Fortunately, however, Germaine speedily revived, and flung herself into the arms of her mother, who uttered a cry on seeing her covered with blood.

"Are you wounded ?" she exclaimed.

"No, no," murmured Germaine, still in a state of great emotion ; "I am not hurt at all."

"And you, my friend ?" asked M. Daudierne, grasping both of the lieutenant's hands.

"Not at all," replied Roger Pontac, at once, "it is the stag's blood you see upon me."

"Then all is for the best. You have saved my niece's life by risking your own. We can never do enough to repay you, but I beg you to believe that I am yours for ever, and in all things. I hope that you will come to us at La Germonière to-night. Our shooting is over for the present, and we will return home. I do not ask you to go with us now."

"I shall come to inquire after Mademoiselle Germaine," said Pontac, timidly ; "but I fear that I am in the way now, and——"

"Alfred, run to the carriage," interrupted Madame Daudierne, "and tell Jean to drive here. Your sister is unable to walk."

"I am not ; you are mistaken, mamma !" said Germaine, now fully restored. "Why, I could climb to the Fairies' Rock ?"

At this moment the rumble of wheels was heard on the road, and the lively snapping of a whip told that a carriage was approaching.

"It is the doctor !" exclaimed uncle Armand. "He comes just in time."

"I assure you that I don't need him," said Germaine.

M. Daudierne, who thought differently, now darted to the road and stopped M. Subligny's vehicle.

"I knew very well that I should find you here," began the doctor, "and I came to see you at work. I'm not a sportsman, but I like to hear shots flying about."

"Don't say that !" cried uncle Armand. "My niece has been almost killed by a stag——"

"Indeed. But it cannot have hurt her, as here she comes. But she

must have been very much frightened, no doubt, and take my word for it, we had better all of us return to La Germonière, where I can attend to her much better."

Germaine, now completely restored, came up leaning upon her mother's arm, and declared that all she needed was rest. The carriage was now at hand, and she was helped into it. Madame Daudierne, uncle Armand, and Alfred seated themselves in turn. Everybody was so bewildered, that Laurence was forgotten; but instead of complaining, she said to M. Subigny: "Will you take me with you, doctor?" and she added, in a low tone, "I have something to tell you."

The medical man gave her his hand to help her in taking a place beside him in the strange looking vehicle which he drove himself. No one gave them a thought. Arthur du Pomméval was now playing the attentive lover at the carriage door, and Roger Pontac had modestly remained at the edge of the wood.

"Gentlemen," said uncle Armand, to Arthur and Roger, "let us see you this evening. Excuse our leaving like this, but it is by order of the doctor."

The coachman whipped up his horses, which started off at a smart trot; but Germaine had time to give Roger a look into which she threw her whole soul.

The doctor's so-called tilbury followed, and the two rivals, remaining alone, separated, after exchanging a few ceremonious compliments. Pomméval had not played a brilliant part that day, and he was by no means pleased with himself.

"This departure is like flight," said M. Subigny to Laurence. "What has happened?"

"I don't know," replied Mademoiselle Daudierne. "I wasn't there when Germaine was attacked by the stag which Monsieur Pontac killed. She wasn't hurt, very happily. But the accident broke up our party, and we all decided to go home."

"Yes," said M. Subigny, "the situation must have been a very exciting one. That good fellow Pontac is the kind of man to please a young girl, and if he has saved your sister's life, she owes him her gratitude, while she owes Pomméval none, and, on my word, if my friend Roger only had a competence——"

"Perhaps he has," interrupted Laurence.

"What do you mean, mademoiselle?"

"Roch Ferrer has found a bag which Madame Vignemal carried upon her person."

"What! You have seen Roch Ferrer?"

"Yes; I saw him just now. I went up to the Roche-de-Lémon, and found him hidden there," replied the young girl.

"I knew he was there. It was I who advised him to leave his hiding place to-night, and fly the country. But he did wrong in showing himself, and especially in speaking to you."

"You know, perhaps, that he loves me?"

"Ah! so he still indulges in that folly? I hoped that he was cured of his absurd passion."

"It is a touching one," said Laurence, softly. "Roch Ferrer, who loves me without the least hope, is a better man than Monsieur du Pomméval, who deceived me, and who would certainly deceive Germaine, if she were weak-minded enough to marry him."

The doctor did not reply. To say the truth, he was by no means prepared to receive this shower of confidential communications, and he felt considerably embarrassed.

"But she will not marry him," resumed Laurence. "I am almost sure that she loves Monsieur Pontac."

"The deuce! This is serious, then," muttered the doctor, shaking his head. "Roger has no money, and Madame Daudierne would of course object to him as a son-in-law."

"Don't you think that she would favour him if he inherited his cousin's money?" asked Laurence.

"I know nothing about that, mademoiselle; but it is impossible for him to be the heir. Roch alone could testify in his favour if a lawsuit were begun; but it would cost him dear, and besides he would not be believed. Pontac might even be compromised, since a magistrate has been stupid enough to suspect him of some sort of complicity in the crime which Roch did not even commit. Roch is going to leave the country, and things will remain as they are."

"But supposing that the solution of the enigma were to be found here?" said Laurence, taking the doeskin bag which Roch had given her from her breast.

"Here, then, is the famous treasure trove!" exclaimed the doctor. "So the young man gave it to you? And why, pray?"

"To be given to you."

"What the mischief does he want me to do with it?" asked M. Subigny.

"He hopes, and so do I, that you will ask Monsieur Lestrigon, the judge, to open it."

"That can be done," replied the doctor, after a moment's reflection. "But I am sure that nothing but valueless papers will be found inside. People do not carry their wills about with them, they leave them with a lawyer."

"That's true," replied Laurence, who was turning the case about in her hands.

By chance rather than inclination she pressed the steel snap, and it yielded to the touch.

"Oh, see?" exclaimed M. Subigny, "you have opened the case. Nothing now prevents your looking at its contents, only close it again. And I must beg you to look, mademoiselle, for my hands are not free, as I am driving my horse."

Laurence had made up her mind to learn everything. She slowly drew a paper from the leather case, and, having unfolded it, she read aloud as follows:—"In case I die suddenly, I beg my husband to take the ebony casket in which our marriage contract is placed, in my bed-room, and hand it to Monsieur Bernier, our notary, who has the key, and who must open it in the presence of the presiding judge of the tribunal at Arcy." This was signed: "Virginie Vignemal."

"Well, mademoiselle," said the doctor, "I was right; this paper doesn't change the situation at all."

"That's true," replied Laurence; "and yet, why did Madame Vignemal attach so much importance to it?"

"I don't know," said the doctor; "but surely, if the casket in question contained a revocation of her will, she would not have instructed her husband to take it to her notary. But be that as it may, I see no harm in

leaving the case with my friend Monsieur Lestrigon, and I don't think it necessary that he should know that it has passed through your hands. I will simply tell him that Roch Ferrer found it, which is the truth. Matters will then follow the usual course. The seals will be removed from the rooms at Le Fougeray, and Monsieur Bernier will open the mysterious casket in the presence of witnesses. This can be done to-morrow, and we shall then know what it contains."

"You will come and tell me everything, won't you?" asked Laurence, pleadingly.

"I will, mademoiselle; and I will also tell the truth to your mother, Mademoiselle Germaine, and all for whom the secret has any interest; but I don't believe that it is worth your while to trouble yourself about it. In the meantime, I will say nothing on the subject to any one."

Laurence was satisfied. She gave the case to M. Subigny, who put it in his pocket, and the conversation ended. Laurence was confused at having spoken so freely, and the doctor did not wish to hear anything more till the matter was fully cleared up. Indeed, on arriving at La Germonière, he was glad to find that Germaine had quite rallied from the fright caused by her perilous adventure.

IX.

WHY the rich druggist who built his country house upon the banks of the Beuvron had allowed himself the luxurious accessory of an orangery was what no one ever knew; but he had perhaps found out that the Duke de Bretteville possessed one, and in that case no doubt he thought that a rich merchant could allow himself the same luxuries as a man of title. In the days of Louis the Fourteenth, the princelets of Germany displayed ruinous extravagance in building palaces and laying out gardens, in imitation of the costly demesne of Versailles.

The druggist did not ruin himself, however; he only half succeeded in doing so. His orangery was immense and superb, and wanted but one thing—orange-trees. He could have bought young ones easily enough, for round about Paris plenty of nurserymen sell them. But then he was particular, and he wanted orange-trees a hundred years old—historical orange-trees, like those at the château of Bretteville, trees which dated from the times of Henry the Fourth. The ancestors of the duke had obtained them from the warrior-king, who slept at Bretteville while campaigning in Normandy—and they had come from the park at Fontainebleau. The Revolution had spared them because the peasants did not know the use of them, and they still flourished marvellously well.

For want of similar ones, which money could not procure, the new lord of La Germonière had been obliged to content himself with some miserable pomegranate-trees and divers growths of doubtful source; cactus plants from Pantin, near Paris, and aloes from Montreuil-les-Pêches.

Madame Daudierne, wiser and less ambitious, had made a hot-house of the orangery, and kept choice plants there, which her daughters were fond of taking care of. In the autumn, when it was too cold in the garden, and too warm in the drawing-room, they liked to stay there, and passed whole days in drawing and painting among the flowers, their mother sometimes coming to sit with them. Their brother did not often show himself

there, but uncle Armand liked to smoke his cigar after breakfast in the midst of the floral treasures.

Two days after the memorable shooting party which had almost ended so disastrously, the family were all assembled in the orangery, with the exception of Alfred, who had not appeared, having gone to Arcy in the morning to buy some new novels.

Germaine, gayer than ever, was busy in cutting off the dead leaves of some flowering shrubs she was particularly fond of. Laurence was making a water-colour sketch of some sensitive plants which had been sent from Nice by an old friend of her father, while at the end of the long gallery with glass windows Madame Daudierne and M. Armand were engaged in serious conversation.

"It is strange that we had no calls yesterday," said the uncle. "The gentlemen are forsaking us."

"Monsieur Pontac came on the evening of the accident, to inquire after Germaine," said Madame Daudierne, absently.

"He could scarcely avoid doing that," rejoined the old bachelor, "but I tried in vain to make him stay until she came down to the drawing-room; he went away after five minutes' conversation. He is a charming young man, but he is very eccentric."

"For my part, I admire his modesty," said the widow. "After what took place in the forest, and the peculiar situation in which Germaine now finds herself, the interview would have been embarrassing."

"True. What has become of Pomméval? How do you account for his disappearance? We have not heard anything of him since we left him on the road, somewhat abruptly, I must admit."

"He has probably been kept away by some business matters," opined Madame Daudierne.

"You don't think that he is angry, then?"

"I don't know; but to tell the truth, if he ceased his visits I shouldn't care about it, nor, I think, would Germaine either."

"I agree with you. She has never wished to marry him, and he did not shine on the day before yesterday. The hussar distanced the handsome Arthur, and I confess that I admire his presence of mind and courage. Germaine certainly does not look upon him with indifference. Have you questioned her so as to find out what she really wishes?"

"I have not ventured to do so."

"Because you are afraid that she would openly declare her preference," said uncle Armand, sagaciously. "I am afraid of that also, but anything is better than remaining in the dark about it. In fact, if I were in your place, I should insist upon knowing, this very day, what the truth of the matter is. Germaine has a right to refuse Pomméval at once. You surely would not force her to marry a man who does not suit her. But what shall you do if she has fallen in love with this handsome officer?"

"I should try to show her that such a marriage would be out of the question," was Madame Daudierne's prompt reply.

"Because Pontac is poor. She knows that very well; but don't think that she will like to hear that objection made. She will tell you that money does not bring happiness, and you cannot deny it, as it was you yourself who taught her that fine maxim. Such is the result of a sentimental education."

"You reproach me in a way that I don't deserve," said Madame Daudierne, somewhat piqued. "I have brought up my daughters in the

right way, and though I have never taught them to love money, I have always told them that none are happy except the good. I had thought of marrying them to men with fortunes equal to what they themselves will one day possess. It isn't my fault if Monsieur du Pomméval is too rich, and Monsieur Pontac too poor."

"Yes, you would like to find the happy medium," said uncle Armand. "But that is not easy to discover; and since you find yourself placed between the two extremes, you must choose. The worst of it all is, that there is nothing definite in the money matters of either of the lovers."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you notice the thoughtful air of the doctor when he left us?"

"Yes, he scarcely attended to Germaine when he got here, but ordered a soothing syrup and rest, and then left her."

"Germaine isn't hurt, and it is absurd to dose her. But, what I mean is, that Subligny, when he got into his trap to return to Arcy, let fall a word which startled me. It was this: 'Try to keep Madame Daudierne from doing anything decisive as regards Pomméval till she sees me again.' I wanted to obtain some clearer explanation, but he whipped up his mare, and drove off."

"That's strange!" said Madame Daudierne. "How is it that he didn't return? He must know that we are waiting impatiently for him."

"I told Alfred to call at his house to invite him to dine with us this evening; but I don't rely upon your son's exactitude, and it seems to me that the time has come for closely questioning your daughter. Shall I call her?"

"Yes, my friend; but you must help me, will you not?"

"Oh! very willingly. Where are you, Germaine?"

"Here I am, uncle!" replied the girl, and she ran towards him from the opposite side of the conservatory, her eyes bright, her hair carelessly tossed back, and a smile upon her lips.

"What serious faces!" she exclaimed, looking from her mother to her uncle, who had seated themselves side by side on one of the benches. "You look as if you were going to try me. Of what am I accused?"

"I will tell you, if you promise to answer me frankly," replied M. Daudierne.

"Was I ever taught to tell falsehoods?"

"No. But silence is not lying, and yet it is often wrong. Now, you are very silent of late."

"I have been so much scolded for being too talkative——"

"Try to be serious for once, and, to begin with, tell us what you are going to do with Arthur du Pomméval?"

"He would make a nice leader for a cotillion, or a good accompanist at the piano, or anything you like excepting a husband."

"That is clear enough as a reply," remarked uncle Armand.

"You ought to have said all this before," exclaimed Madame Daudierne, "for you did not speak like that on the day when Monsieur Subligny came to ask your hand for him, and it was folly to lead this young man on by a promise which you did not mean to keep."

"I promised nothing. I said that I would think the matter over, and——"

"But you had already made up your mind," interrupted uncle Armand. "Why did you hesitate in this way?"

"Because I wanted Monsieur du Pomméval to marry Laurence."

"You must be crazy!"

"No, for she loves him: he himself loved her once, and he will return to her. Would you have proof of it? Look over there, but don't let yourself be seen."

Germaine, standing up, and half hidden by one of the huge green tubs which the druggist had failed to fill with orange trees, could see what was going on in the garden at the other end of the conservatory. Her mother and her uncle seated in front of her, had on their side only to lean forward a little to see M. du Pomméval walking stealthily along past the glass windows.

"He saw Laurence," said Germaine in a low tone, "and he thinks that no one else is here. I bet that he'll come in on tiptoe and begin an explanatory talk with her. Don't let us stir or make the least noise. It will be very funny indeed."

Madame Daudierne glanced at her brother-in-law, who remarked in a low tone: "Why not? On the day before yesterday, after the shooting party, Pomméval seemed to me to be somewhat out of sorts. I should like to know what ails him. That young man is not to be depended on, I fear."

"Here he comes!" whispered Germaine. "I hope that Laurence won't be foolish enough to call us."

Germaine was not mistaken. Pomméval had slipped into the orangery, and was walking softly along towards the corner where Laurence was finishing her water-colour sketch. He evidently had no idea that her mother, uncle, and sister were within hearing, for had he seen them he would no doubt have approached and spoken to them. The orangery was very long, like some corridor in a convent, and the pyramids of pots of flowers standing upon shelves effectively screened the little group of family counsellors. The handsome Arthur no longer had that triumphant demeanour which distinguished him from the other dandies of Arcy. His eyes lacked lustre, his face had a weary expression, and—a more significant symptom than all the rest—he was far less carefully dressed than usual.

He came forward, hat in hand, and Laurence, who was absorbed in her occupation, did not see him approach. When she raised her head, he stood before her. She turned pale on recognising him, but did not lose countenance. "Are you looking for my mother, sir?" she said coldly.

"No, mademoiselle," replied Pomméval, in a low, sad tone, "I was looking for you."

"Indeed! What have you to say to me?" asked Laurence, with a flash in her eyes.

"Can't you guess?"

"Not at all."

"I have come to implore your forgiveness."

"For what, pray?"

"For having played an unworthy part. I loved you, I have never ceased to love you, but as I was jealous, I feigned for another a love which I did not really feel."

"What!" said Laurence, in an ironical tone, "you felt indifferent to my sister, and yet you asked for her hand in marriage! What motive had you for trying to deceive her?"

"I was insane!—I adored you, and I could not obtain from you either an engagement or a promise. You allowed me to hope, but that was all. Then—I scarcely dare tell you this—I thought that you were so acting

through coquetry, and that, if I could stimulate your jealousy, you would finally grant me the consent which I had so long sought for. I hope that——”

“You had a poor opinion of me, sir,” interrupted Laurence, who had now fully recovered her self-possession, “and you think little of the sufferings of others. So, breaking Germaine’s heart, after breaking mine, would have been but a pastime for you?”

“I knew that your sister would pretend to accept my attentions, and finally refuse to marry me.”

“How could you know this?”

“I guessed that she loved Monsieur Pontac,” replied Pomméval. “And I am certain that she will no longer hide the fact that she does love him. Didn’t he save her life at Bretteville?”

“And now that you no longer hope to win her, you offer me what she has rejected?”

“Mademoiselle, I swear that I have never changed!” said the handsome Arthur, pleadingly. “Appearances are against me, no doubt, but I beg of you to put me to the proof. Give me permission to ask for your hand, and this very day——”

“You will go to my mother?”

“Immediately, if you wish it. Where is she? I was told that I should find her here.”

“She is here. You, of course, know what she will answer?”

“What! is Madame Daudierne so near?”

“She is over there, on the other side of the orangery, with my uncle and sister, and I cannot advise your making this attempt, however flattering it may be for me. I can even predict that if you do so, you will close our doors for ever against you. It would be better to go away at once and never return again.”

Pomméval reddened to his very ears when he heard this well-deserved dismissal, and he asked himself, no doubt, what he ought to do. However, at this very moment Alfred ran into the orangery shouting:

“I have some news, the strangest news! Why, there is no one here! Ah, yes! Laurence, and—how is this? Pomméval, too! Well, if I expected to see anybody here, it wasn’t you, my dear fellow. Do you know what they say at Arcy?”

“At Arcy?” repeated Pomméval, who had turned pale at sight of young Daudierne. “No, I don’t.”

“Upon my word!” said Alfred, “I would rather some one else told you, then, and I advise you to go to town at once, without loss of time. Your lawyer must want to see and talk to you, for I hope that everything is not lost; but there are stories about—they may be false—still——”

Pommeval did not ask to hear any more. He was so out of countenance that it was painful to look at him, and he could not find anything to say; so he took his leave, stammering a few words of apology to Laurence, and leaving the orangery much faster than he had entered it.

“How is this?” exclaimed Alfred; “he has gone off without saying good day to you, or shaking hands with me! Then what the people at Arcy say must be true!”

“What is it? what do they say?” asked M. Daudierne, from the opposite end of the conservatory.

“Are you there, uncle? What! is mother there, too—and Germaine?”

"Are you playing at hide-and-seek? Pomméval didn't know that you were there."

"We did not mean that he should. Tell us what news you bring."

"No good news. It is said at the club that a will of Madame Vignemal's has been found—a will which disinherits her husband."

"The deuce! Your friend Pomméval would lose everything then, for he was no relation to the lady. And to whom has she left her fortune, pray?"

"No one knows yet. But it is certain that it isn't to poor Arthur. She hated him."

"She has, perhaps, simply revoked her first will," remarked uncle Armand, "and in that case it would go to her natural heirs, of whom there are a dozen, so it is said. But that matters little to us, if Pomméval is deprived of it. Upon my honour, I should like to learn the truth! I cannot understand the behaviour of the doctor. He must know all about it, and he is well aware how much it interests us. He ought to be here to tell us all about it. I told you to invite him on my behalf to come and dine here this evening. Did you go?"

"Yes; but he was out?"

"Well, will you do a useful act for your family's sake, for once in your life? You will? Well, then, do me the favour to mount Ralph, who can't yet have been unsaddled, and gallop over to Arcy, and send Subligny to us. It is the usual hour for his consultations. You are sure of finding him at home."

"I will go with pleasure, but I shall stay over night. Ralph has already been to Arcy—there and back once already. He can go once more; but to return again at a fast pace, and twenty-eight miles, too, in one day, is too much."

"Stay as long as you like. We do not need you here, but we must see the doctor. Tell him that I entreat him to come here immediately."

"Don't worry yourself! I'll make him come by force, if needs be," said Alfred, darting out of the conservatory.

"Can you understand all this, any of you?" asked uncle Armand.

"I can see that Monsieur du Pomméval is ruined," said Madame Daudierne, in a low tone. "You were quite right, my dear. Germaine ought to have made up her mind before, as she does not wish to marry him. It will be said now that she only accepted him for his money."

"I don't care about that," replied Germaine, "for I shall soon prove that I don't care for money in the least."

"Do you know what Monsieur du Pomméval said to me just now?" asked Laurence, looking at her mother and uncle.

"We were too far off to hear," replied Madame Daudierne.

"He swore that he had never loved any one but me, and was about to ask for my hand in marriage."

"What! has the young fellow been making game of us?" said uncle Armand, frowning. "He goes from the elder to the younger, and back from the younger to the elder. He must imagine that he can take his choice. People don't act in that way, and I shall soon tell him what I think of his behaviour!"

"Oh! we shall not see him again," said Laurence; "his plan has fallen through."

"His plan? What do you mean?"

"Do you know why he came to offer me his heart? It is because he knew that he had lost the inheritance. He hoped that I should become engaged to him on the spot, and as the fortune escapes him, he wishes to marry at any rate. He realised on the day before yesterday, that he is not the object of Germaine's choice, and he thinks that, for want of better, I should do for him."

"He must be an abominable scamp!" exclaimed M. Armand, who was now thoroughly incensed.

"No. He is a money-loving, ambitious, country fellow."

"Those faults can be overlooked," said Madame Daudierne; "but I now see that he has no heart. Heaven forbid that he should enter our family!"

"Are you still angry with me for not having accepted him?" asked Germaine, archly.

"No," replied uncle Armand; "you are a very wise little girl. But the time has come for speaking plainly. Do you love another?"

"Yes, I do, indeed."

"I was sure of it; but your mother has a right to know whom it is. You can speak out before your sister and me."

"Can you not guess?"

"Yes. I am afraid that I can. It is Monsieur Roger Pontac."

"Yes, it is he."

"Because he killed—bravely I admit—the stag which so nearly drove its horns into your breast? That was a fine act; but how many times did you ever see this young man before the shooting party at which he saved your life?"

"Once—twice—three times," replied Germaine, counting on her fingers.

"The mischief you have! Your heart goes ahead very fast! You scarcely spoke to him in the drawing-room on his first visit. It is true that he sang an Arabian melody to you about a 'melodious bird.'"

"I beg your pardon, I know him a great deal better than you think I do. On the day when Ralph carried me so far away, I met Monsieur Pontac at the Roche-de-Lémon."

"The deuce take your Roche-de-Lémon and all the fairies in it!"

"I bless those good fairies!" exclaimed Germaine. "If they hadn't protected me, I don't know how I should have returned to La Germonière. Fortunately, however, Monsieur Pontac was at hand. It was he who brought me home. Without him I should never have found the way."

"But you hid this adventure from us!" exclaimed Madame Daudierne, in surprise; "that was very wrong indeed!"

"I know that I did wrong in that. But I had made up my mind to marry him, and I wished to give you time to know and appreciate him. It was I who begged him to come to see you on some pretext or other."

"This is astounding!" growled uncle Armand. "See what the ingenuous young creatures of the present day are capable of!"

"Would you rather I had played the hypocrite?" asked Germaine. "I said nothing for a week, it is true; but now I am telling everything, and I boldly declare that I am forced to marry. Yesterday, Monsieur du Pomméval saw me fall into Monsieur Pontac's arms, and everybody in Arcy will hear the story. It is too late to draw back. If I don't marry the man who saved my life, I shall be in great danger of remaining single to the end of my days, for nobody will take me."

"Upon my word of honour!" cried uncle Armand, fairly amazed by his niece's logic, "I am beginning to think that you made arrangements

for the stag to rush at you—or else the hussar came to an understanding with the villainous beast. But you talk of marrying Monsieur Pontac as though it were all settled. Are you sure that he wants to marry you ? ”

“ If he doesn’t, I shall remain single,” said Germaine, smiling.

“ Very well,” said M. Daudierne. “ You know the sentiments of your officer. They perfectly agree with your own, and I need only ask if you have faced the possibilities of this pretty match. I have nothing to say against the man whom you have chosen. I am willing to admit that he is better worth having than Pomméval, in every respect. The friendship with which the Duke de Bretteville honours him will be of advantage to him. But, just now, he has nothing to depend upon but his pay, which must be about two hundred francs a month. You have seven or eight thousand francs a year, and later on, when your dear mother is no longer in this world, and Monsieur Pontac has won a general’s epaulets, you may have an income of twenty thousand francs. If the fairies who have united you continue to protect you, you will have a large family, for everybody knows that that is the first thing they look out for. Well, then, my dear, supposing they provide you with five or six children, your daughters will be obliged to marry paupers.”

“ No, sub-lieutenants, like their mother before them,” retorted Germaine, smartly.

Uncle Armand raised his hands to heaven. He was unable to bring forward another argument. As for Madame Daudierne, she did not speak ; in fact, she was in a state of utter consternation.

Laurence now came to her sister’s aid. “ Monsieur Pontac cannot be so poor as you think,” said she, gently, “ for if, as is said, Madame Vignemal has revoked her will, he will have a share of the inheritance.”

“ What in the name of sense do you mean by that ? ” said her uncle, in a tone of vexation.

“ Monsieur Pontac is Madame Vignemal’s cousin. Ask Monsieur Subligny.”

“ As much a cousin as anybody can be,” said Germaine.

“ You knew that, then ? ” said Madame Daudierne.

“ Yes ; ever since the accident of the ferry-boat, and you ought to have known it, too, for the doctor told the story in your presence. Don’t you remember what he said about the child that Madame Vignemal put to school in Paris, and who was one of her relations.”

“ What ! was that child — ”

“ Roger Pontac ? Yes,” replied Germaine. “ The doctor mentioned his name, but you have no memory for names.”

“ But you have, and the memory of the heart besides,” rejoined uncle Armand. “ I remember it all now, and I admit that your hussar has a chance of inheriting, but only a chance.”

“ I don’t care if it be no more. People would think that I was marrying for money.”

“ You are decidedly crazy, little one. But I must see Subligny. This is why he said to me : ‘ Don’t settle anything with Pomméval until I return.’ But he has not returned, the good-for-nothing fellow. What can he be thinking of to leave us like this ? ”

“ Don’t be vexed, uncle ! Here he comes,” said Germaine.

“ Here he is, indeed,” exclaimed Madame Daudierne. “ He has buttoned his great overcoat up to his chin, and has his ceremonious face on. We shall hear what the news is now.”

The worthy doctor came in, and shook hands all round in the quietest way in the world. One would have thought that he knew that he had been impatiently looked for, and took pleasure in working up his friends' impatience by his calmness of manner.

"My nephew has just gone off on horseback in search of you," began M. Daudierne. "You must have met him on the Arcy road, not far from here."

"I did not come direct from Arcy," replied the doctor. "I went away this morning, and I have just come from Bretteville."

"Ah! then you did not meet Pomméval either on his way home."

"No; and I am glad that I did not."

"Is it true, then, that he isn't the heir? Alfred told us just now that such was the report in town, but I didn't believe it."

"Well, I came expressly to tell you the great news of the day," said M. Subligny, slowly. "Yesterday I was detained by inquiries that it was necessary to make. But I have made them all now, and as complete and as thorough as possible. You will be greatly surprised when you hear what I have to tell."

"Did Madame Vignemal revoke the legacy which she made in favour of her husband," asked uncle Armand, impatiently.

"Better than that! This is what has happened: The young man who was present when the husband and wife were drowned discovered upon the bank of the Beuvron a little leather case which Madame Vignemal wore round her neck, but at the time he said nothing to any one about finding it."

"Ah! I always thought that he was a bad fellow," interrupted uncle Armand.

"No. He is simply a wild creature, who knows nothing of life, and he did not imagine that the case contained any valuable papers, so he kept it, but did not open it—remark that! I have been busying myself very much about him lately; I made him agree to leave the country, and take service in a regiment in Africa. He started off yesterday."

"So much the better. He will be hanged somewhere else," exclaimed uncle Armand.

"I hope that he will never be hanged at all, or even put in prison. I have reformed him, and I can answer for it that he will make his way in the army. But, before leaving, he gave me the case which he had picked up on the banks of the river," added the good doctor, glancing at Laurence.

He felt that his narrative must cause her great anxiety, and he wished to reassure her by letting her know that she was not, and would not be, mixed up in this delicate matter of the case found by her gipsy lover.

"I at once realised," he resumed, "the importance of this discovery, and I gave the case to my friend the judge, who had it opened with all requisite formalities. A paper was taken from it on which Madame Vignemal had written that she begged her husband, in case she died before him, to take a casket which stood in her bedroom to Monsieur Bernier, her lawyer. She charged Bernier to look over the papers contained in this casket. This examination was made yesterday, and will have most unexpected results."

"I can guess what they are," exclaimed uncle Armand. "Pomméval is disinherited, of course!"

"It is not he who is disinherited," replied the doctor; "it is the

husband, but it amounts to the same thing, since Pomméval has no relationship to Madame Vignemal."

"Then the wife's relations will share the fortune among them?"

"No, it is not that, exactly."

"What is it, then? Explain yourself, my friend, we are dying of impatience."

"The casket contained a will written in the testatrix's own hand, signed and dated, and, in one word, perfectly regular. And this will, which I have read, ran thus, or almost in these words: 'My very dear husband cannot object to my modifying my earlier intentions, in view of what would happen after my death if I allowed them to remain as heretofore.'"

"You are repeating the preamble."

"Yes; but the will comes after it, and it is as well that you should know everything. So I will continue: 'My husband's sole heir,' wrote Madame Vignemal, 'is Arthur du Pomméval, his sister's son, and I am sure that he would not venture to alter the natural order of inheritance. Now, I do not wish that my property should pass to a man of dissipated life who would soon squander it.'"

"The deuce! the lady of Le Fougeray was pretty severe on poor Pomméval," said M. Daudierne.

"Severe and unjust, for he will be a very steady man, I believe," retorted M. Subligny. "But he could never please her, and his youthful follies will cost him dear. But listen to the rest: 'I have,' continued the testatrix, 'therefore, made an arrangement which will preserve the fortune painfully acquired by my father's toil, and will not change my husband's situation during his lifetime. This fortune will not go out of my family, and I am sure that it will be wisely administered, for true blood cannot be false to itself, and the heir whom I name has already proved by his good conduct that he is worthy of succeeding me.'"

"Good! She has chosen the most economical and laborious of her cousins—some labourer or village money-lender, no doubt," opined M. Daudierne with a jeer.

"Not exactly. The will is as follows. I have learned it by heart: 'I, the undersigned, Virginie Pontac, wife of Monsieur François Vignemal—,'"

"Pontac! Was our neighbour the aunt of your favourite, Roger Pontac?" asked uncle Armand.

"His aunt, 'Brittany fashion,' at most. The father of Madame Vignemal and the father of Roger were first cousins, and they both were named Pontac. They had several other relations of the same degree who would have been co-heirs with Roger if she had died *ab intestat*. Fortunately, she foresaw this, and you will see how she took measures to prevent the division of her fine estate, Le Fougeray. 'I, the undersigned, etc.,' as I said before, 'give and make over by this present will, to my husband, François Vignemal, the use of all my property, personal and real estate—,'"

"The poor man derived no benefit from all that."

"His wife could not foresee that he would die when she did, and, you see, her intentions were good. To continue: 'And I will the *reversion* of the property to my cousin, Roger Paul Joseph Pontac, now a sub-lieutenant in the 9th Hussars, in garrison at Gabès, Tunis.'"

"What! our young friend sole legatee!" exclaimed uncle Armand.

"That is incredible! You told us that his aunt gave him her malediction ten years ago."

"Wait! There is an explanation and a condition, the latter being 'that Roger Pontac shall leave the army a year at the most after the death of my husband, and go to live at the Château of Fougeray. 'I hope,' adds Madame Vignemal, 'that Roger will accept this condition, which I make in his own interest, and that he will overlook the wrong I did him at times, as I have long overlooked the faults of his youth. He wrote to me lately, to tell me of his promotion to the rank of officer, and of his intention of soon returning to France. I am awaiting him in order to inform him of the disposal of my property, as here stated, this being the well-considered expression of my wishes.' This was dated Le Fougeray, November 19th, 1881," added M. Subligny.

"So that if the accident had happened a month ago Pomméval would have been the heir," muttered M. Daudierne.

"Then all is for the best."

"Is that really your opinion, doctor?"

"Yes; and I have thought so more than ever of late."

"We thought that you felt an interest in Monsieur Pomméval," observed uncle Armand.

"You thought correctly, and the proof is that I made overtures in his name, overtures which I have since regretted. But I am also interested in Roger. He is a brave, loyal, and charming young fellow, and I have known him from his childhood. I can answer for him as I would for a son of my own, if I had one."

"So, then, he becomes a millionaire at once, if he consents to resign his position as an officer, and live in the country, which I doubt."

"I should doubt it also, I must say, if——"

"If what?" asked uncle Armand. "If he held a higher rank in the army, or if the inheritance were a less splendid one?"

"No," replied M. Subligny, looking at Germaine, "if Le Fougeray were less near to La Germonière."

"Well, for my part," exclaimed Germaine, "if he consulted me I should advise him to continue to be a soldier."

"And as poor as Job," said her uncle, shrugging his shoulders.

"No. He would still have his share of the property," said Germaine.

"You are mistaken, mademoiselle," said the doctor, "you are at fault just as we, your uncle and myself, were when we tried to understand the clauses of the Civil Code, which regulate the presumption of survival. Since I made that mistake I have mistrusted myself, and I decided that I would make inquiries of a lawyer whenever I might have occasion to look into any legal question. Accordingly, I have asked Monsieur Lestrigon, the judge, what would happen if Roger preferred to continue to follow his present calling, and he replied that the condition made by the testatrix not having been kept by the legatee, Pomméval would ask, and would perhaps obtain, a declaration that the will be declared null and void. If this were declared, a lawsuit would begin between himself and the natural heirs of Madame Vignemal, who might win the suit. In that case, they would try to have Roger Pontac excluded under pretext that the refusal to execute a testamentary clause is equivalent to a renunciation of the inheritance. There would then be another lawsuit against people who are not at all interesting, I assure you. The band of cousins would be headed by a certain Paul Le

Masle, who had already come to an understanding with a rascal, a lawyer named Vaurinet, to accuse poor Roch of having drowned Madame Vignemal at Roger's instigation."

"They were indeed accused of that," rejoined M. Daudierne. "I myself was among the folks who accused them, at least in my own mind. It is true that I did not then know that our friend Pontac was in question. But don't you think, doctor, that this marvellous finding of a will in his favour will give more appearance of truth to vague suspicions? It will be said that he had a motive for making away with his cousin."

"That was certainly said yesterday. The public prosecutor started that hare. But the judge proved to him that it was enough to read the will attentively to establish Roger Pontac's innocence. 'I am waiting for him, to inform him of the testamentary dispositions which I have made,' wrote Madame Vignemal on the 19th November, that is to say, three days before her death. Now it is proved that Roger did not see his cousin either before or after the drawing up of this will. It was even proved that he went to the gate of Le Fougeray and did not dare to cross the threshold. It is also certain that his aunt had not spoken to any one of what she had done at the last moment for a young fellow of whom she had formerly been fond, and who had never failed to deserve it—far from it, since he had become an officer by dint of bravery and perseverance. How could he have known that he would inherit anything from her? My friend Lestrigon brought these arguments forward so effectively, that the public prosecutor finally listened to reason, though very much against his will. Then I took Roch Ferrer's defence upon myself, and without much trouble I induced this searcher after criminals to give up the suit against our volunteer, who had now enlisted. It was, in point of fact, the army and the nobility that the lawyer wished to make a thrust at, by having an officer arrested at the house of the Duke de Bretteville. He cared very little about the poacher, and indeed he won't trouble himself any further about him."

"This is good news, my dear doctor," now said uncle Armand, "and you don't know, perhaps, that it is especially agreeable to one of my nieces."

"I am sure that it is agreeable to both of them," replied M. Subligny, glancing at Laurence, who had given a joyful start on hearing that Roch Ferrer had nothing further to fear from the law.

"No doubt, but Germaine has personal reasons for being glad; reasons which you don't know, but perhaps can guess."

"Can the discomfiture of poor Pomméval please her?" asked M. Subligny, somewhat maliciously.

"No, for one should never rejoice when misfortune befalls one's neighbour," replied Germaine, "but I confess that I am not grieved. That fine gentleman, the beau of Arcy, doesn't deserve to be rich. He loves no one but himself. I should be glad if the same thing happened to all heartless men."

"What has he done to be spoken of like this?" asked the doctor.

"Why, he deceived my sister, and tried to deceive me," replied Germaine. "Heaven has punished him in the manner in which he will feel it most, that is, by taking away his money. It is as it should be."

"It is unfortunately true that I don't know how to qualify Monsieur du Pomméval's conduct," said Madame Daudierne. "I have made up my mind not to receive him again."

"Did you not say, madame, that he had just left La Germonière," asked M. Subigny.

"Yes; and he would have done better to have stayed away, for he showed himself to be what he really is. Would you believe me, sir, that he had the audacity to tell my elder daughter that he had never ceased to love her?"

"Then he has been making game of me also! Why, he can be no better than a fool, and this will teach me a lesson. I shall not take a matrimonial embassy again."

"You would, perhaps, be more fortunate the next time," said Germaine, casting down her eyes.

"I prefer not to try. These missions are completely apart from my profession, and I shall leave them to those who can fulfil them better."

"I thought that you had just come from Bretteville?"

"So I have, mademoiselle."

"Well, then," said M. Daudierne, intervening in his turn, "in that case, you have necessarily seen Monsieur Pontac?"

"Yes, I have had a long talk with him."

"And you told him, of course, that he is the heir?"

"I went to the château for that purpose."

"Well, how does he take his good fortune?"

"Very quietly, I assure you," replied the doctor. "He values honour much more than money, and I think that he would willingly give up his cousin's legacy for a bit of red ribbon bravely won."

"The devil! Does he mean to decline the inheritance so that he may remain in the army?"

"He is hesitating. The resolution which he will take will depend upon one thing only."

"The advice of the Duke de Bretteville, perhaps?"

"No, not exactly," said Dr. Subigny, hesitating. "The duke is of opinion that he ought to accept the conditions of the will, but he knows what is the true situation of Roger, and he leaves him free to act according to circumstances."

"My dear Subigny, your replies lack clearness," said M. Armand. "To what circumstances do you allude, pray?"

"To a marriage, for instance. If Pontac could now marry, and if the wife he married wished him to leave the army, he would make up his mind to become the lord of Le Fougerey. But if, on the contrary, he remains single, he would prefer to stand a chance of becoming a general some day or other."

This significant declaration troubled Madame Daudierne greatly, and uncle Armand a little. Germaine, however, undoubtedly expected it, for she did not change countenance. Laurence smiled and drew near her sister. She had forgotten her own sorrows, and now thought only of Germaine's happiness.

"Doctor," said uncle Armand, after a silence of some moments' duration, "I think that as we have got to this stage of affairs we need not hide anything from you. I shall plunge boldly into open confidence. After that, it will be your turn to do the same. You will not be very much surprised to hear that my youngest niece has given her heart away without consulting her mother, and that her choice has fallen upon a sub-lieutenant of your acquaintance. It remains to be seen whether the sentiments of this sub-lieutenant are the same as those of the young lady, and no one knows so well as you do what to tell us on this important point."

"Oh, uncle," exclaimed Germaine, with a pretty air of vexation, "you are changing parts. It is the doctor's place to speak the first."

Madame Daudierne was silent, but her face showed that, like her daughter, she thought that her brother-in-law was going too far.

"I admit that I ought to speak," replied Dr. Subligny, gaily, "but please remember what I just told you, that I have sworn not to meddle with such things any more. However, here is a visitor for you."

"The mischief take the visitor and Baptiste, too," exclaimed M. Daudierne, "for disturbing us by bringing him here without asking whether we wish to receive him or not. People praise old servants," he resumed, "but they are wrong in doing so. A young man would not make such a mistake, and Baptiste is a fool."

"I understand his conduct the less from the fact that the gentleman he is bringing with him is a perfect stranger to me," said Madame Daudierne.

"And to me, too," murmured Germaine.

"You can see him, then? I can't. You hide him from me."

"It is perhaps some new functionary who has just received an appointment at Arcy," opined Laurence.

"You are mistaken, mademoiselle," said the doctor, smiling. "With the well known opinions of your family, Government employ  s don't venture to come to La Germon  re."

"And, besides, this gentleman," said Germaine, "is far too distinguished looking for a Republican functionary. The people in the employ of the Government now-a-days don't look so gentlemanly, do they, uncle?"

The family assembled together at the end of the conservatory were grouped in such a manner that the uncle, placed behind his nieces, could not see the personage who was arriving so unexpectedly. Dr. Subligny saw him very well, however, and at the moment when Baptiste opened the door of the orangery, he left the group to go and meet the visitor who was coming in.

"You know this gentleman, it appears?" remarked M. Armand Daudierne, in a low tone.

"Yes," said the doctor, in the same key, "and so do you, Come with me, for it is your duty to present him to Madame Daudierne."

"Good heavens! it seems to me that it is the——"

"Yes; it is he. I knew that he was coming."

Madame Daudierne and her daughters heard these "asides" without understanding what they meant, and looked with anxious curiosity at the stranger whom they had never seen before. He was an elderly, but not an old man. His beard, which he wore full, was very grey, but his lofty figure was still upright, and his face unwrinkled. His gait and bearing showed him to be an aristocrat, and did not admit of his being mistaken for any of the landowners around Arcy, or the wealthy citizens or farmers. He had, indeed, a look of great distinction.

Madame Daudierne was amazed at seeing this noble-looking personage offer his hand to her brother-in-law, who was making a great many bows.

Germaine, for her part, understood the situation at once, and whispered in her sister's ear: "Let us slip off. This is our chance. You will know why presently." And she darted away, dragging her sister after her.

Their mother, completely bewildered, had no time to call them back or to ask for any explanation of their hasty retreat.

"My dear Reine," said uncle Armand to her, "here is the Duke de Breteville, who has done us the honour of coming to see us."

"An unexpected honour," stammered the modest lady of La Germonière.

"You remind me, madame, that I have many apologies to make to you," began the duke, bowing with that easy politeness which belongs of right to the past. "I am your neighbour this year for the first time, indeed, for I have never stayed at Bretteville since the war, but I should already have come to pay my respects to you had not the death of my only son obliged me to live in retirement."

"I am very grateful to you, Monsieur le Duc, for having had the kindness to leave home on my account," replied Madame Daudierne, "and it is I who should apologise. I so little looked for the honour of your visit."

"We might return into the house," said uncle Armand; "the drawing-room would be better suited to the duke."

"I am very comfortable here," replied M. de Bretteville, smiling. "I only regret having made Madame Daudierne's daughters take flight; but I shall profit by their absence to state my errand, and I trust that they will return when I have been heard. I came, madame, to ask for the hand of Mademoiselle Germaine Daudierne on behalf of the comrade of my unfortunate son, I mean Monsieur Roger Pontac, whom I love as though he were one of my own family. Need I add that I should not ask for this young lady's hand thus suddenly if I did not know that my young friend is very deeply in love, and that his fortune will now admit of his aspiring to an alliance which he could not have looked for when he had but his sword."

The duke might have added that Roger knew what were the feelings of Germaine towards him; but he was careful not to be so indiscreet, and, indeed, under the circumstances, it would have been almost impertinent to have said it.

"I am greatly flattered by your proposal, Monsieur le Duc," said Madame Daudierne. "We are well acquainted with Monsieur Pontac, and appreciate his qualities. But you know, Monsieur le Duc, that I must, first of all, consult my daughter, and I will, therefore, go——"

"You know very well, my dear Reine, that it is needless to do that," interrupted uncle Armand. "The Duke de Bretteville is certainly aware of what took place in his forest, and besides, Germaine, who cannot keep a secret, told us just now plainly enough that she was engaged to Pontac, and would accept no husband but this excellent young fellow, who is in every way suited to make her happy. Your consent is all that is wanted, my dear sister-in-law, and I trust that you will put no obstacle in your daughter's way. For my own part, I shall express my approval at once, and vote a 'yes' with both hands; and so, I am sure, will the doctor."

"Oh! I give mine enthusiastically?" exclaimed the old surgeon.

"If I refused I should be alone against you all," said Madame Daudierne, in her turn.

"But you won't refuse. I am going to find Germaine."

"You needn't go far, then, for I am here," replied a silvery voice.

The saucy girl was not far off. She had hidden herself behind a row of young plants, and suddenly appeared, leaning upon the arm of her sister.

Laurence was paler than usual, but Germaine did not appear to be in the least degree embarrassed. She made a graceful curtsy to the Duke de Bretteville, and said to him gaily: "I heard every word, Monsieur le Duc, but I beg of you to believe that I am not in the habit of listening at the door."

The duke was not one of those strict persons who are shocked at every trifling breach of formal custom, and he did not think of being surprised by this somewhat unceremonious entrance. He only thought of admiring the flower of youth and beauty standing before him, the charming girl, whose sparkling eyes, sweet, frank face, and sympathetic voice, appealed to his heart; and he began to smile. It was the first time that he had done so since his son had fallen on the battle-field.

"Mademoiselle," said he, extending his hand to Germaine, "I was sure that Roger could not love any but a charming girl. Now, that I have seen you, I think him the happiest of men," and he kissed the delicate white hand of the smiling maiden.

"Not yet," she said. "I have some conditions to make."

"Roger will agree to them all."

"Are you sure of it? I wish to be the wife of an officer. And as he will lose his cousin's inheritance if he does not resign his rank——"

"In a year from now, mademoiselle," interrupted M. de Bretteville.

"And before that time comes he will be decorated," added Dr. Subigny; "and when once he has the cross of the Legion of Honour, I don't see why he should remain in the army. At present the army has no advantage as a career. Our Government talks of retaliation upon our enemies, but they retaliate with the national guard."

"The day for retaliation will come, let them do what they may," said the duke; "and Roger will return to his rank if he is not given a regiment to command."

"That is true," said Germaine; "the will allows him a year to make up his mind. Then, I will wait also, and it will be better to do so. What would the fine gentlemen of Arcy say if I married Monsieur Pontac a month after he had inherited this property to Monsieur du Pomméval's loss? It would seem as if I had all the time been looking out for the richest suitor."

"It would be still worse to wait till Pontac takes possession," urged Dr. Subigny. "It would be thought that, having been deceived in the hopes founded upon Pomméval's chances, you had insisted upon being certain. I can hear the townsfolk and the fashionable men of our charming locality exclaiming: 'She cares very little what husband she has, provided she has the money with him,' besides making other equally kind remarks."

"You are above such talk, mademoiselle," said the Duke de Bretteville; "but you must allow me to plead Roger's cause. You will be asking too much of him if you defer his happiness for a whole year."

"And if you require that he should remain a soldier after marrying you, you will be obliged to go to live in garrison at Gabès," resumed uncle Armand.

"I can very well go there, and it would, indeed, be delightful," replied Germaine. "I should use my influence for poor Roch Ferrer, who has taken service so bravely." So saying, the young girl stole a glance at her sister.

"Roch will make his way alone," remarked Dr. Subigny at this moment.

Madame Daudierne had not yet said a word, and it was time for her to do so. "My dear child," she began, in a voice which showed agitation, "the reasons which you advance are bad ones. You love Monsieur Pontac, and I don't blame you for doing so, nor do I oppose your marrying him;

but if the present state of things continued, it would be intolerable for yourself, for him, and for us as well. I ask you to decide at once."

"I have decided," answered Germaine.

"Then, mademoiselle," resumed the duke, "you authorise me to take Roger the good news which he is so impatiently waiting for?"

"So impatiently that he stays away at the Château de Bretteville," remarked the young girl, archly.

"It would, perhaps, have been better for him to have remained there; but he could not, and I must venture to confess to your mother that I have brought him with me."

"What! Is he here?" exclaimed uncle Armand.

"I left him on the road at the end of the avenue, and I am sure that he is counting the minutes, for I promised to return when I had fulfilled my mission."

"I had better go to look for him, Monsieur le Duc. In fact, I will do so at once," said M. Daudierne.

"Will you tell me, my dear uncle, what you are going to say to him?" asked Germaine.

"That you had a ridiculous notion in your head, but that you have got over it, and will marry him, with or without delay. Is that the idea?"

"About that."

"Good! the rest is your affair," rejoined uncle Armand. "It is his business to persuade you to fix the day and arrange for your journey to Gabès."

"You may add that it is a woman's duty to obey her husband," said Germaine, archly. "I have read that pretty maxim in the Civil Code, and I submit to the law."

"The wedding can take place, then, in the chapel of the Château de Bretteville," said the duke, smiling. "I am going to Italy in six weeks' time, and Roger wishes me to be one of the witnesses of the ceremony."

"It will be a great honour to us, Monsieur le Duc," replied Germaine, in a ceremonious tone, "and I wish whatever Monsieur Pontac desires; but, before he comes, I have still ten minutes' liberty, and I may as well profit by the opportunity to talk for a moment alone with my sister."

No one opposed this; in fact, the arrangement suited everybody. Uncle Armand longed to go and fetch Pontac, Madame Daudierne wished to talk with the Duke de Bretteville, who, on his side, was desirous of speaking of the sterling merits of his young friend, while the doctor wanted to speak of the certainty of the inheritance, and reveal M. Lestrigon's opinion upon this important point. Laurence, moreover, was not sorry to leave the family council, which no longer concerned her.

"Is it true—really true—that you have ceased to love him?" asked Germaine, as soon as she and Laurence were alone.

"Yes, I despise him too much to love him now."

"Some persons say that contempt does not change love," remarked the younger girl. "I don't know how that may be. But you loved him once, did you not?"

"I was blind then; he has opened my eyes by his own conduct," retorted Laurence.

"Perhaps you love another?"

"What an idea! Are you crazy?"

"I may be mistaken; if I am, so much the worse. I thought——"

"What did you think?"

"You will laugh at me, but never mind," said Germaine. "Well, then, on the day before yesterday, at the shooting party, you went up to the Roche-de-Lémon. I saw you go."

"And mamma saw me, too. What does it matter if I did go?"

"I fancied that you will marry a man of your choice, as I shall—"

"I had not any thought of questioning it," replied Laurence, sadly.

"It sometimes replies without being questioned," said the younger girl. "But keep your secret if you have one. Let me tell you, however, that I hope that you will marry a man of your choice, as I shall—you could not make a bad choice, I'm sure—and if he loves you as you deserve to be loved, what matters anything else? I regret but one thing—that Roger is rich. I should have been glad had he owed everything to me, and yet I am going, in spite of myself, to make what they call a 'good match' at Arcy. But you can find what I have found—a brave soldier who fights for love of you, and who will return with a rank which he will have nobly won—"

"In ten years' time," murmured Laurence, with great emotion. "It will be too late!"

"But, darling, Roger became an officer in eight years' time, and he did not go away for my sake, in the first place. Roch, who adores you, will win his epaulets in five years."

"Roch!—what do you mean?"

"Mean! Why, that I have guessed everything, and, besides, I have the right to interest myself in Roch, for, if he had not given our good doctor the case belonging to our poor neighbour of Le Fougeray, I should have had a great deal of trouble in getting rid of Monsieur du Pomméval. Now, not a word more. No one shall know what I know—no one except Roger, who would not put one obstacle in Roch Ferrer's way. I'm sure of it. But no more now, for here comes my uncle with Monsieur Pontac. Come, and let me introduce my husband to you!"

This was soon done, although Laurence shrunk back. Germaine had the tact to prevent Roger from expressing his feelings, for she did not give him a chance to speak.

"Monsieur le Duc," said she, laughing, "it was upon your grounds that my happiness was found. The Roche-de-Lémon belongs to you, and the fairies who inhabit it surely favoured my first meeting with Monsieur Pontac. You must allow me to invite them all to our wedding, and later on to the baptism of our children—"

"When Heaven sends them, I will educate them," said Laurence.

"I will do the same for yours, then," exclaimed Germaine, throwing her arms round her elder sister's neck, "for you will marry, too. The fairies have promised me that you shall."

X.

ARTHUR DU POMMÉVAL, on leaving La Germonière, drove post-haste towards Arcy. He was not pleased with himself, and the mare harnessed to his tilbury experienced the consequences of his ill humour. The provincial beau had staked his last card and lost. He had played fast and loose with the two sisters, and now neither of them would have him. What was he to do? As he drove along at a quick pace the breeze gradually

cooled his burning brow, and by degrees he partly recovered his composure, and was able to reflect.

It was not merely a matrimonial alliance that had fallen through. Ruin stared him in the face, and he pictured himself fallen from his high estate, no longer the leader of fashion in the Beuvron district, reduced to seek some employment for a livelihood, scorned and twitted by all his whilom associates. He reckoned up his numerous liabilities, recapitulated the mortgages on various patches of land that belonged to him, counted what he owed to Parisian and provincial tradespeople, and such was the sum total that he positively shuddered. He had inherited not merely his father's belongings, but also his father's nature. The property that had come to him—diminished already by parental excesses—had now dwindled almost to nothingness. A paltry fifty thousand francs was all it would fetch—barely an income of a hundred pounds a year. And amid the despair which the prospect of poverty fomented in his heart, he saw Laurence's pale, dignified face appear before him. There was a gleam of scorn in her eyes, and her lips had almost a revengeful expression. What should he do? Could he survive such a failure of all his plans?—could he live to be sneered at by all the busybodies of Arcy, by all the young fools whom he had lorded it over in the halcyon days of his success?

Paris! The thought of the gay city of luxury and pleasure, where he had meant to cut so fine a figure, where he had hoped to attain to the highest rung of the social ladder, darted all at once through his mind, and he experienced an acute pang as he realised that the great dream of his life must be abandoned. But no, it should not be said that he was beaten; he must make an effort of some kind to retrieve his position. His mind had often proved fertile in resources, and reflection would, no doubt, enable him to triumph over what he called his bad luck.

He instinctively reined in his mare, and while she trotted on at a slower pace, he once more strove to recover his composure and decide on a definite course of action. As for the Vignemal property, that, at least, was decidedly lost. He could not hope to have Madame Vignemal's will in favour of Roger Pontac set aside, no matter how skilful might be the legal advisers that he chose. Moreover, even if the will *were* quashed, he would derive no personal benefit from the change. It was evident enough that the deceased lady had survived her husband, so that in the event of the will being set aside, her peasant cousins would advance their claims to share conjointly with Roger. Thus a lawsuit could in no wise improve Du Pomméval's prospects. Evidently enough he must reconcile himself to the loss of the coveted estates.

That, however, was more easily said than done. A man is not easily consoled for the loss of an object which he has felt almost within his grasp, and Arthur had firmly believed that Le Fougeray was his. The familiar proverb—"There is many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip"—had been strikingly exemplified in his case, and the prize had seemed so near at hand that his mortification was all the more intense. Even if he did accept the idea that there was no hope left, what could he do with himself in the future?

His mind had often evinced signs of being practical and methodical; but all these varied complications, these sudden changes in his prospects, this fall from success to despair, had completely unhinged it. The thought that he might perchance retrieve his fortunes in Paris proved but a passing gleam, rapidly extinguished. Had he sacrificed his entire means he could

not have shone there for long—for a few months at the most—and then he would again find himself in the same position as now. Moreover, it was repugnant to him to try “Parisian life” on a secondary scale. Should he try military life, then? No; the same reasons deterred him from enlisting. Having shone for so long in the front rank, he could not accustom himself to the idea of becoming a subordinate. The thought of grooming horses, furbishing arms, doing sentry duty, and obeying some coarse-minded corporal, appalled him.

As nothing seemingly pleased him, what could he do? He reflected for a few moments longer, and then a new idea flashed through his brain. It came so suddenly, and with such force, that he unwittingly slashed his mare over the neck. The animal reared, and then darted off at a break-neck pace. Maddened by his new thought, Arthur did not think of restraining the beast; on the contrary, he urged her onward, and man, vehicle, and horse flashed past over the road to the wonder of the few peasants approaching in the contrary direction.

At a wayside inn displaying the familiar sign of the Rising Sun, and situated at an equal distance between Arcy and La Germonière, some waggoners, who had halted to water their horses, raised a shout of dismay on seeing M. du Pomméval approach at so furious a pace, and one of them ran out upon the road and made a vain effort to stop the tilbury.

It was of no use. The mare, seemingly maddened, galloped onward with increasing speed, and Arthur now cracked his whip and urged her along as if he were really bent upon self-destruction.

Indeed, the thought which had so suddenly roused him from meditation had been one of suicide. And in his heated brain, distracted by failure and remorse, this thought speedily ripened into a set purpose. Would not death be a fitting crowning for his career? Was not the sleep of the tomb preferable to mediocrity? He had shone as the beau of Arcy for years; as the beau of Arcy he would die! And his tragical fate would, perhaps, serve as a condonation for his offences. The gilded youths whom he had surpassed in eccentricity of attire and lavishness of expenditure would no longer sneer at him; but rather shudder at thought of his dramatic death. How he had humbled them all in the days gone by! How such a fate would make them quake in their shoes; and what remorse he would leave to the Daudiernes!

The inmates of La Germonière despised him, no doubt. He had been mean and petty in his dealings with them; he realised it, but rather than accept the natural punishment of his offences, he dreamt of an indirect revenge.

It was vanity that impelled him to this course. Others destroy themselves from motives of despair. Now Arthur certainly despaired of retaining his whilom position as a leader of provincial fashion, but it was not so much this feeling as one of self-conceit that urged him to follow the rash course he was now pursuing. At present he thought less of the sufferings that limited means would entail upon him if he lived than of the sensation that would be caused if he died a violent death. The wind, the horse's pace, the blood rising to his head, all maddened him, and nought in the scenery around was calculated to turn him from the thought of suicide. A cold grey sky stretched overhead; a dull mass of leafless forest trees covered the heights limiting the horizon; the plain, nearer at hand, looked bleak and chilly, with stubble sparsely scattered here and there, and long furrows, whence nothing sprouted, extending to a far

distance. The homesteads, with their white walls and high pointed thatched roofs, seemed cold and dismal as they were descried amid clumps of apple trees, devoid alike of fruit and foliage. The poplars lining the road swayed their gaunt upraised arms in the wind which blew past with the mournful sound of a dirge. It was the season when Nature slumbers, and, as Arthur raised his eyes and looked around him, it seemed to him as if the presence of death pervaded the entire landscape. Once he perceived some children crossing a brown stretch of field with a dog gambolling beside them, but otherwise no one was in sight. It was market-day at Arcy, and most of the peasants were away from home. Such housewives as remained were not to be seen. Seated at their chimney corners they were knitting or sewing, and singing some simple country air, while with one foot they rocked an infant to sleep.

Nature exercises a powerful influence over human feelings. In spring time, when everything speaks of life, when the sun shines softly over the pale green leaves of the sprouting trees, when the pairing birds twitter on the branches and amid the hedges, when the earth already gives promise of coming harvest, the thought of death is scouted. Love and hope are paramount in every heart; but how different when the sere and yellow leaf has fallen to the ground, when Nature has set aside her verdant flowery mantle and appears naked, bleak, and bare, like the very skeleton of herself!

No wonder, then, that Arthur du Pomméval should dwell upon his tragical thoughts. Nature looked dead to him, and he wished that he were dead also. In former times he had given proof of the provincial peasant-like caution which he had inherited from his mother; but now he was exclusively governed by the impulsiveness, the rashness which his father, a prodigal like himself, had transmitted to him. He had no need of steel or bullet. The stones upon the road, the horse's hoofs, the carriage wheels alone would effect his purpose. He had driven over to La Germonière unattended. The highway was quite deserted, and his mare need only come upon an obstacle for a catastrophe to take place, unhindered and unperceived.

It occurred sooner than Pomméval expected, perhaps. Maddened though he was, listless as to his horse's course, the instinct of self-preservation which exists in every human being might yet, at a slight warning, have deterred him from carrying out the rash plan which his vanity advised.

But it was not to be.

About a mile from the wayside inn, where the waggoners had raised a shout of alarm and made a futile effort to stop the runaway mare, the road turned abruptly to the right, and was embanked, overlooking a strip of lowland where the villagers pastured their kine in the summer. At equal distances above the embankment blocks of stone marked out the course of the highway.

Arthur du Pomméval's mare—an animal of value, full of blood and fire—did not choose in her mad career to swerve and follow the beaten track, but, rushing onward in a straight line, she sprang over the embankment. The wheels of the tilbury came in contact with one of the upright stones, the vehicle tilted, fell upon one side, and horse, driver, and carriage rolled in a confused mass down the incline.

It was all over. At the very moment when danger became apparent, Arthur, by a sudden revulsion of feeling—due to that instinct of self-pre-

servation which is evinced even by the man who drowns himself with premeditation, when he rises once more to the surface and clutches despairingly at the rippling waters of the river to find no hold there, alas!—Arthur, abruptly sobered, as it were, had frantically drawn in the reins and tried to restrain his mare.

Too late! With one bound the animal had cleared the embankment—the vehicle had turned over, and Du Pomméval, clinging to the rail, had been drawn down the slope. The embankment, freshly repaired, was not coated with grass; rough, angular stones dotted its surface, and ere the mass reached the lowland the beau of Arcy was already frightfully wounded.

Still, despite a broken limb, he was able to extricate himself partially, and he might, perhaps, even yet have saved his life, but his mare, in her death throes, launched out a kick as if to free herself from the vehicle. The animal's hoof struck Arthur's forehead with such force that it shattered his skull, and, without a sigh, without a groan, he fell back dead.

Vanity had guided him through life, vanity had impelled him to seek this fate.

* * * * *

If M. du Pomméval's death occasioned but little mourning in Arcy, it at least created a great stir, such indeed, as he himself had foreseen.

Dr. Subligny, resisting the friendly efforts of the Daudiernes to detain him, had escorted the Duke de Bretteville as far as the road leading towards La Bretèche, and then, while his vehicle proceeded along the road to Arcy, he mused over the events of the day.

Night was beginning to fall, and the tall poplars which fringed the highway stood out black and upright against the ruddy sky. The wind had fallen. The labourers had regained the homesteads which could be discerned beyond the fields, with bluish smoke, betokening the preparation of the evening meal, rising above their thatched roofs, and with window panes gleaming here and there, as the last wintry sun rays fell upon them. From afar came the bleating of sheep and the bark of a dog, as some drover wended his way towards Arcy. Across the valley a church bell rang out, and from the shade of a little wood there resounded the report of a fowling-piece, fired by some peasant bent on bagging a rabbit for his Sunday meal.

The doctor felt happy. He had dismissed all thoughts of Pomméval's perfidy to dwell upon the happiness of Roger and Germaine. He admired the former, recalled to memory the young officer's earlier days, and reflected with satisfaction that he had made ample amends for his youthful frolics. Germaine pleased him too—so gay, light-hearted, and full of fun and spirits, and yet gifted with powers of discernment most unusual in an inexperienced girl. The doctor was reflecting thus when suddenly loud shouts aroused him from his reverie. Looking up, he perceived a group of peasants collected at the roadside.

"What is the matter, my lads?" he asked kindly.

"A fearful accident, doctor," replied one member of the party, which seemed to be in a state of dismay.

"An accident! Why, who has been hurt?" asked M. Subligny, promptly.

"Well it seems, doctor, that as Monsieur du Pomméval was driving to

Arcy an hour or two ago, his mare ran away with him, and rushed over the embankment of the road-way, a mile or so beyond the Rising Sun."

"Good heavens!" cried the doctor, who, although thoroughly displeased with Arthur, did not allow feelings of personal resentment to interfere with the dictates of humanity. "And Monsieur du Pomméval, has he been hurt?" he added anxiously.

"I'm afraid, doctor," said the same peasant who had previously spoken—a petty farmer of the district—"I'm afraid that he's dead—in fact, I'm sure of it. We only recognised him by his trap; he has no face left. And his mare is killed too. That is a pity, and no mistake. Such a fine animal. There wasn't the like of her for twenty miles and more around."

Dr. Subligny did not pay attention to this latter remark, so suggestive of the peasant who prizes a horse far more than a fellow-man; but he nervously exclaimed: "Let me see Monsieur du Pomméval at once. How is it that none of you have been to Arcy for help, as you say this happened a couple of hours ago?"

"Why, sir, we only just passed the corpse with the dead horse and the carriage as we were coming back from the market at Arcy. The accident took place on a part of the road where there are no houses near. True, I just heard it said at the inn over there that they had seen Monsieur du Pomméval dash by like lightning, and that some waggoners had tried to stop him; but the innkeeper told them it was not worth while, as Monsieur du Pomméval was one of the best drivers of these parts, and would know very well how to deal with his horse. Besides, no one was quite sure about the mare having run away. She always went such a pace, and then Monsieur du Pomméval seemed to be urging her on."

While listening to these explanations, Dr. Subligny repaired to the scene of the accident. The shattered tilbury, the mangled mare, and her disfigured master, had been left undisturbed. The peasants, with true Norman caution, had not cared to touch them. After all, thought they, it might not be an accident, but a crime, and then justice would call them to account; and although they had no great sins upon their consciences they did not care to be mixed up in anything of the kind. One of them, who belonged to that class of persons, who, when they find a man hanging, prefer to run for the police rather than cut down the body and try to restore life, had certainly hinted going to the public prosecutor's, but the others had deterred him from doing so.

However, it is quite certain that no intervention, were it judicial or medical, could have done Arthur du Pomméval any good. As soon as Dr. Subligny perceived the young fellow's remains he instantly realised that he had long since been dead; indeed, that he must have expired at once. The mare's hoof, stained with his blood, and to which fragments of his skin adhered, told the story plainly enough. There had evidently been no crime; only a most tragical accident.

The doctor, seeing that there was no call for him to display his medical or surgical talents, now contented himself with making the necessary arrangements for the removal of the corpse to Arcy.

"Hum!" said he, having once more climbed into his trap. "A tragical end, and no mistake, to this adventure. It began with two deaths, and it finishes with another. Pomméval had a petty mind, and his conduct was not at all honourable. Still such a death is very sad. On the other hand, his means were almost exhausted; he would have cut a

sorry figure after his behaviour with the Daudiernes; it would all have certainly been known in time; so, perhaps, this is the best thing that could have happened to him. But no, it's too horrible; and, after all, I can't help pitying the fellow."

The good doctor, naturally enough, had no idea of the twenty minutes' drama which had been enacted in Pomméval's brain; and the folks of Arcy were equally ignorant of the precise circumstances of handsome Arthur's demise. They all flocked to his funeral, which was a splendid affair. All the gilded youths of Arcy were present, and behaved themselves fairly well. Some of them even looked sorry, and, among the gathering, one espied a number of good-looking women, many of whom wept copiously for the beau of the town.

The arrival of the news at La Germonière cast gloom over the entire household. Germaine and Laurence were both fully aware of Pomméval's unworthiness, and yet his death made them think of him less harshly. If such had been Arthur's object in premeditating suicide, it must be confessed that it was fully attained. Uncle Armand, stern as he was, decided to attend the funeral "for the sake of propriety," and took young Alfred with him. Madame Daudierne, Laurence, and Germaine closed their doors to all visitors, save the worthy doctor and Roger Pontac, and made active preparations for their return to Paris, whither the young lieutenant speedily followed them.

But little now remains to be told. Laurence was very nervous for some time after Pomméval's death, but it can hardly be said that she regretted him. She pitied his fate undoubtedly, but, despite all his eloquent pleadings, he could never have awakened a responsive chord in her heart. The one that he had played upon in earlier times had snapped, and, indeed, Laurence allowed it to be supposed that she would never love again. The unworthiness of the man she had loved had perhaps made her believe that all men were the same. Still the happiness of her sister Germaine, instead of making her more melancholy, brightened her by degrees; and it must be said that Roger Pontac was no stranger to this change. Usually reserved, he became more communicative and unconstrained in the intimacy of the Daudierne family, and although he never neglected his duties to his lady-love, he readily employed his rare conversational powers in trying to raise the spirits of the whole household. Uncle Armand seconded him, and now the ferry-boat accident, and Pomméval's courtship and tragical demise, seem like bad, vaguely remembered dreams to the whilom inmates of La Germonière.

Roger has not yet retired from the army, but he will do so before the end of the year, and he married his sweetheart, Germaine, yesterday, Roch Ferrer is on the point of becoming a corporal, and will certainly be raised to the rank of an officer eventually. Will Germaine's prediction as to his marriage with Laurence be some day fulfilled? Life, we know, is stranger than fiction, and so, after all, why not?

THE END.

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